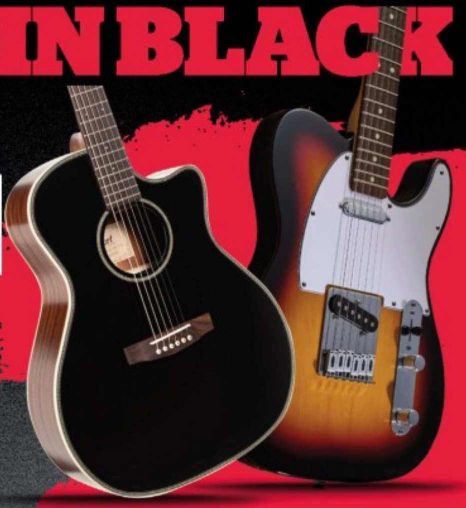
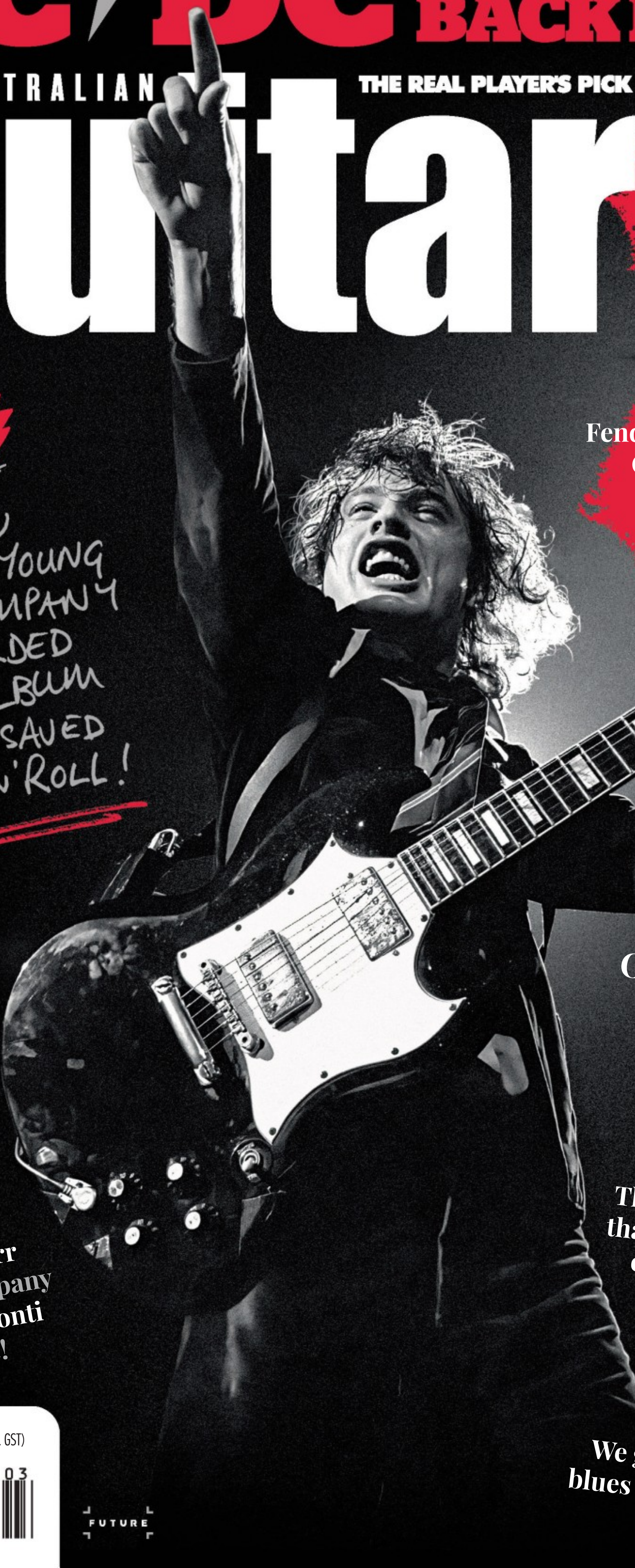
AC/DC 45 YEARS OF BACK IN BLACK

AUSTRALIAN
guitar
THE REAL PLAYER'S PICK



Gear tested

Fender Standard Telecaster, Cort Essence Series, Marshall & more!



How Angus Young and company recorded the album that saved rock 'n' roll!

Exclusive interview

Courtney Barnett

On electric fingerstyle, Neil Young and what's next

Made in Japan

The manufacturing boom that changed the course of electric guitar history

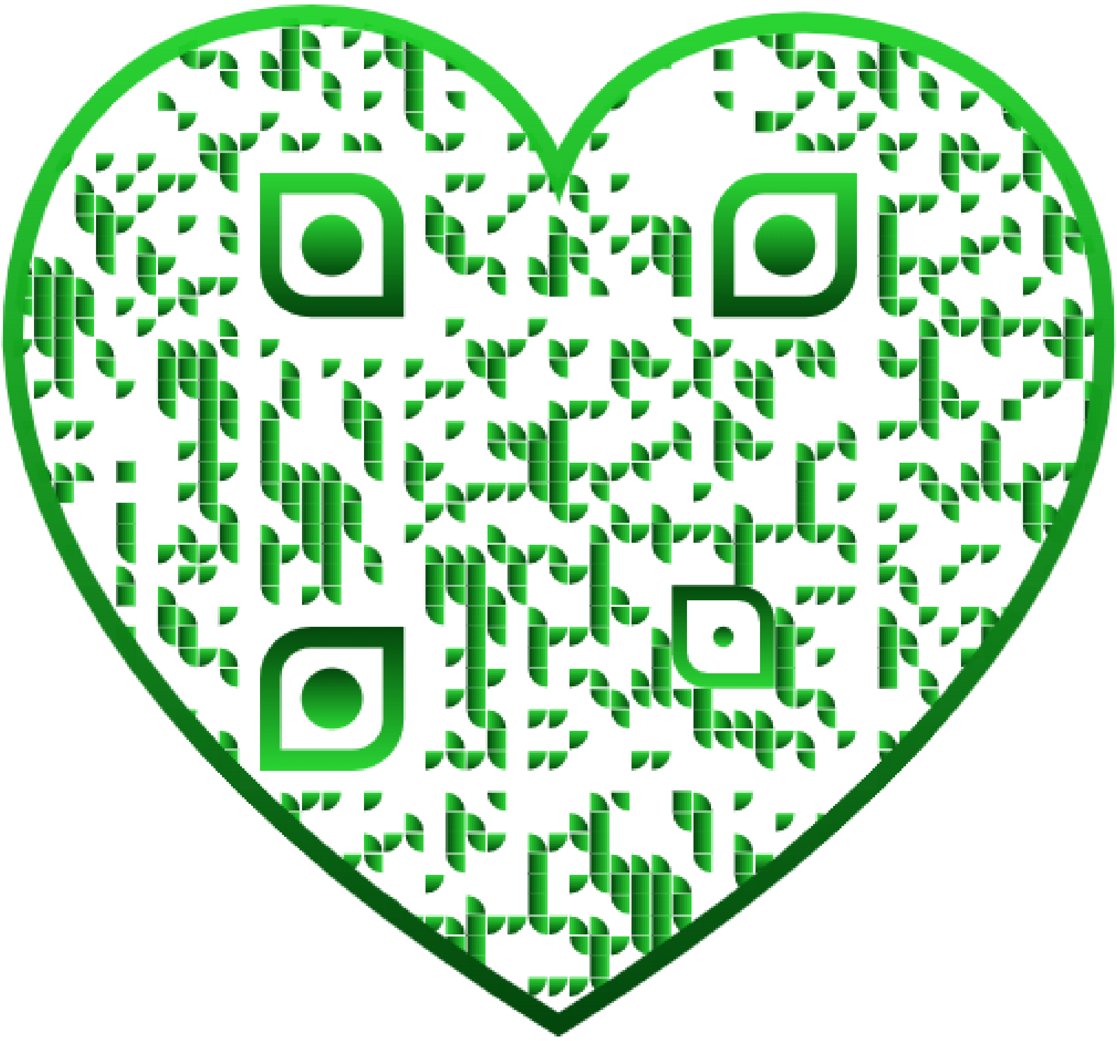
Technique blow-out!

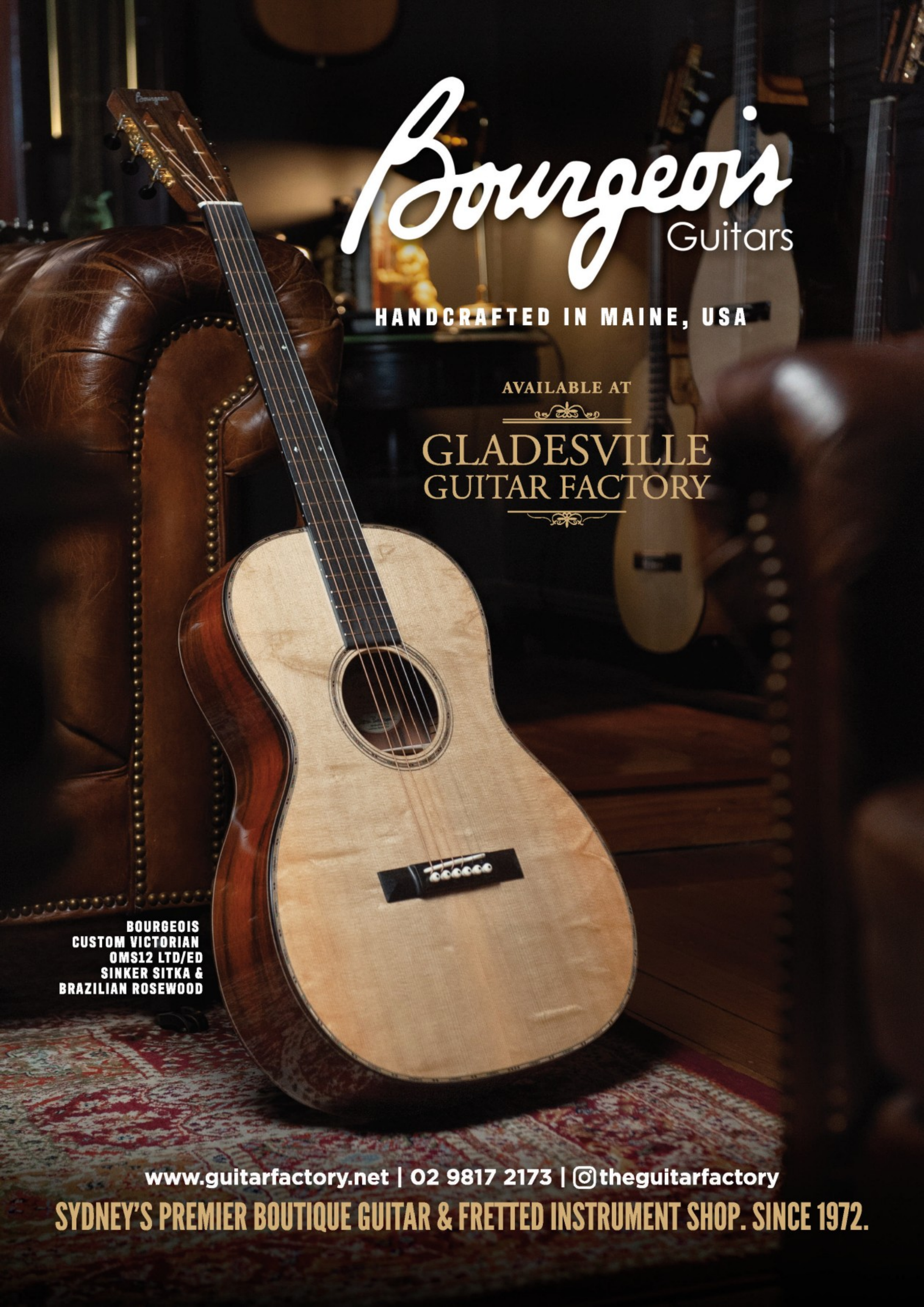
We go deep on country-blues rock, plus Radiohead & Metallica

Plus

Kiki Wong
Orianthi
Johnny Marr
Dead & Company
Mark Tremonti
& more!

VOLUME 163
AUS $12.95 • NZ $13.90 (INC. GST)
ISSN 1329-7686
03
9 771329 768605
FUTURE





Bourgeois
Guitars

HANDCRAFTED IN MAINE, USA

AVAILABLE AT
GLADESVILLE
GUITAR FACTORY

BOURGEOIS
CUSTOM VICTORIAN
OMS12 LTD/ED
SINKER SITKA &
BRAZILIAN ROSEWOOD

www.guitarfactory.net | 02 9817 2173 | theguitarfactory

SYDNEY'S PREMIER BOUTIQUE GUITAR & FRETTED INSTRUMENT SHOP. SINCE 1972.

CONTENTS

TUNE UPS

06 Courtney Barnett
10 Melbourne Guitar Show
12 Orianthi
14 Mark Tremonti
16 Sonic Youth
19 Kenny Wayne Shepherd

FEATURES

20 AC/DC
30 Dead and Company
40 Made in Japan
54 Johnny Marr
60 Kiki Wong

REGULARS

04 News
78 Hot Gear
98 Power Tools

LESSONS

64 Radiohead
68 Metallica
70 Country Blues Rock Technique

REVIEWS

87 Shure MV7i
88 Audio-Technica ATH-R70XA
89 Gibson Victory and Victory Figured Top
90 Fender Standard Telecaster
92 Cort Essence Series GA4 and OC4
93 Taylor Gold Label 814e SB
94 Mesa Boogie Mark IIC+ head
95 Orange O Tone 40
96 Marshall Studio 900
97 Hamstead x That Pedal Show Redwing Analogue Stereo Modulator

SUPPLIED

DAVE NAVARRO HAS CHOSEN THE GUITAR HE'S USING TO RECORD HIS FIRST POST-JANE'S ADDICTION MATERIAL – AND IT'S A HISTORIC BUILD

Dave Navarro is currently gearing up to record his first new post-Jane's Addiction material, and he's already picked out which electric guitar he will use for the project – and it's a celebratory milestone build from PRS. Navarro is poised to start the latest chapter in his musical career, after last year's high-profile Jane's Addiction reunion came to an abrupt end when the guitarist was punched on stage mid-solo by vocalist Perry Farrell.

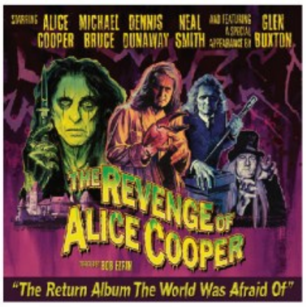
A few days after the incident took place, Navarro seemingly pulled the curtain down on Jane's Addiction when he released a statement that confirmed the band had "made the difficult decision to take some time away". Now, though, Navarro is about to head back into the studio to do some "work" with his former Jane's Addiction bandmates Eric Avery and Stephen Perkins, and he'll be bringing a PRS beauty with him for the job.

The guitar in question is an ultra-limited 40th Anniversary Custom 24 of which only 25 examples – all signed by Paul Reed Smith himself – have been crafted. Stylistically, it looks similar to Navarro's own PRS SE signature guitar (it's got a pristine white finish and HH configuration) but opts for white humbucker rings and chrome hardware. It also has a 40th Anniversary truss rod cover and Smith's signature scrawled on the back of the headstock.

"Thank you to @bevfowlerprs_ar and @prsguitars for this amazing 40th Anniversary edition work of art," Navarro writes on Instagram. "This is 1 of 25 builds signed by Paul himself and I am humbled and honored to be gifted such a rare and historic piece. Getting ready to do some work with @ericaveryinsta and @stephenperkinsdrummer and this will be the first tool I reach for."

Words by Matt Owen

ORIGINAL **ALICE COOPER** LINEUP REUNITES AFTER MORE THAN 50 YEARS – AND ANNOUNCES BRAND-NEW ALBUM


STARRING ALICE COOPER MICHAEL BRUCE DENNIS DUNAWAY NEAL SMITH AND FEATURING A SPECIAL APPEARANCE BY GLEN BUXTON
THE REVENGE OF ALICE COOPER
BOB EZRIN
"The Return Album The World Was Afraid Of"

SUPPLIED

The original Alice Cooper group has reunited for the first time in over 50 years for the release of their forthcoming studio album, The Revenge of Alice Cooper, out July 25 via earMUSIC.

Featuring Alice Cooper, Michael Bruce on guitar, Dennis Dunaway on bass, and Neal Smith on drums, the new album – their first since 1973's Muscle of Love – sees the shock rock legends reunite with longtime collaborator and producer Bob Ezrin, whom Alice Cooper previously described as "our George Martin." It promises to be "a high-voltage journey into vintage horror and classic '70s shock rock," recapturing the sound and energy that propelled the original Alice Cooper lineup to stardom. It also includes a posthumous appearance by Glen Buxton, the band's original lead guitarist who passed away in 1997, on What Happened to You – a previously unreleased recording that features his original guitar part.

Additionally, one of the bonus tracks is a raw, alternate take of Return of the Spiders – another version of which appears on 1970's Easy Action – which was missing for 50 years. It was recently unearthed from the original multi-tracks and mixed by Ezrin in preparation for the album. As for the recently released first single, Black Mamba, featuring Robby Krieger of the Doors, it was, as Cooper describes it to Billboard, "definitely an Alice Cooper, from-the-ground-up song."

"When we started to play that it's when I knew the spirit of the Alice Cooper group was back and that what we were making was very much an album that could've been in the '70s when we were last together," adds Ezrin, who, aside from being the producer, also co-wrote songs, played keyboards and percussion, and sang backing vocals. **Words by Janelle Borg**

DANIEL KNIGHTON / GETTY IMAGES

CARLOS SANTANA COLLAPSES; CANCELS SHOWS "OUT OF AN ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION"

Carlos Santana has been hospitalized in Texas for observation after a pre-show medical emergency forced him to cancel a show at San Antonio's Majestic Theater on April 22. According to a statement released by his manager, Michael Vrionis, "Mr. Santana was at the venue (Majestic Theatre) preparing for tonight's show when he experienced an event that was determined to be dehydration.

"Out of an abundance of caution and the health of Mr. Santana, the decision to postpone the show was the most prudent course of action."

Vrionis assured fans that the veteran guitarist is "doing well and is looking forward to coming back to San Antonio soon as well as continuing his US Tour."

Santana has suffered similar episodes in the past that have forced him to reschedule concerts. In 2022, he collapsed onstage during a performance in Michigan – after which he postponed six shows – while in 2021, he canceled his Las Vegas residency following an "unscheduled heart procedure".

Words by Janelle Borg

AC/DC 45 YEARS OF BACK IN BLACK
AUSTRALIAN guitar
THE REAL PLAYERS PICK
HOW ANGUS YOUNG AND COMPANY RECORDED THE ALBUM THAT SAVED ROCK 'N' ROLL!
Gear tested
Exclusive interview
Courtney Barnett
On electric fingerstyle, Neil Young and what's next
Made in Japan
Plus
Technique blow-out!

#163

EDITORIAL
EDITOR Shaun Prescott
GROUP ART DIRECTOR Troy Coleman

CONTRIBUTORS
Chris Bird • Joe Bosso • Dave Burrluck
Andrew Daly • Chris Gill • Steve Henderson
Denny Ilet • Amit Sharma
Stuart Williams • Jenna Scaramanga

ADVERTISING
NATIONAL ADVERTISING MANAGER
Lewis Preece
EMAIL lewis.preece@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS
techmags.com.au or call
+61 2 8227 6486

PO Box 161, Hornsby, NSW 1630

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards. The manufacturing paper mill holds full FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) or PEFC certification and accreditation

All contents ©2025 Future Publishing Australia or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.

Privacy statement
If you provide information about yourself this will be used to provide you with products or services you have requested. We may supply your information to contractors to enable us to do this. Future Publishing Australia will also use your information to inform you of other publications, products, services and events. Future Publishing Australia may also give your information to organisations that are providing special prizes or offers and are clearly associated with the Reader Offer. Unless you tell us not to, Future Publishing Australia may give your information to other organisations that may use it to inform you of other products, services or events. If you would like to gain access to the information Future Publishing Australia holds about you, please contact us.

FUTURE
Connectors.
Creators.
Experience
Makers.

Future plc is a public
company quoted on the
London Stock Exchange
(symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

Chief executive officer **Kevin Li Ying**
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief financial officer
Sharjeel Suleman
Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

Fender
PLAYER II
MODIFIED
HOT-RODDED.
READY TO GO.

MARK BOWEN FROM IDLES PLAYS THE **PLAYER II MODIFIED TELECASTER®** SH IN DUSK

©2025 FENDER MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS CORPORATION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

TUNE-UPS

Here's The Thing

NOW LA-BASED, **COURTNEY BARNETT** HAS SPENT THE LAST FEW YEARS WRITING HER FIFTH YET-TO-BE-TITLED LP, BUT SHE'S LATELY EMERGED WITH A NEIL YOUNG COVER AND A NEW LIVE VIDEO. SHE SAT DOWN WITH AUSTRALIAN GUITAR TO DISCUSS JAGUARS, THE GODFATHER OF GRUNGE, STRAYING OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE, AND THE BUSY AFTERLIFE OF SONGS.

Words by Shaun Prescott

COURTNEY BARNETT HAS had a busy 2025. In March she appeared on the Neil Young tribute album *Heart of Gold* with a gorgeous dream pop-inspired cover of 'Lotta Love'. For anyone drawn to the stripped back suburban intimacy of her breakthrough LP *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit*, the Young rendition – with its spectral reverb and woozy textures – may come as a surprise.

But perhaps it's not really a surprise: her most recent song-oriented LP, *Thing Take Time, Take Time* was a stylistically diverse affair – a truth somewhat obscured by the fact that Barnett's voice and lyricism tends to take centre stage. Those elements are foregrounded for good reason, but it was nevertheless illuminating to hear Barnett's 2023 soundtrack album *End of the Day*, which removed all traces of voice and narrative in favour of a gentle, melancholic instrumental approach that foregrounds Barnett's textural interests as a guitarist. If you've ever wondered why an electric guitarist would play without a plectrum, first ask Jeff Beck, and if that fails, listen to *End of the Day*.

Now based in LA, Barnett is working on a new studio album, which she hopes will be completed by the end of 2025. Writing and recording is currently prioritised over touring, though she did appear in a recent Fender Sessions video, during which she flagrantly re-contextualises two highlights from *Things Take Time*.

Your cover of 'Lotta Love' by Neil Young is gorgeous. I love the reverb on the vocals – it lends it a dream pop fogginess. Did you choose this song? Why?

Yeah I chose this song, and I really love it. There's something really special about it. I've done a couple of his songs over the years, but never officially. We just spent the day in the studio, and I just let the producer and the engineer do their thing in the control room. I think it actually started out a little more reckless, and then within a couple of takes in the studio it changed direction, which is kind of nice because I wasn't expecting it. We added the acoustic, and I think we kinda dropped the electric, or at least it's toned down a bit.

After listening to the cover I went back to your last song-oriented LP, (*Things Take Time...*) and noticed all these subtle differences from your earlier records that I wasn't alert to in 2021. It sounds really varied on the level of atmosphere. Is the dreaminess of this Neil Young cover an indication of where you're going? Can you tell me anything about where you're going?

Sometimes I find it hard to know because I'm so into it, I'm just writing all these different songs and sometimes I don't completely see the differences in dynamics in them or whatever. I'm working on a new album now, and the songs... I guess they're kind of varied. It depends on the mood and energy that's necessary for the song. Sometimes it's not even intentional, I just have to follow. I like it when things move around and when everything doesn't sound the same.

Are you writing with the band or writing alone and bringing it in?

The second one. It's normally how I do it: flesh things out as much as I can and then bring it to the band. Sometimes I'll wait until the last minute to bring it to the studio, just for that extra piece of magic [that comes with] people not knowing what they're doing, which sometimes backfires. But it's an exercise, an experiment. Sometimes I like to go into the studio with an idea of what I'm doing but not the full picture. Sometimes there's something special that

AMARILLO ★ TEXAS

"Sometimes there's something special that comes out of those stressful moments of being powerless and out of control a little bit; some sort of subconcious idea shines through"

comes out of those stressful moments of being powerless and out of control a little bit. Some sort of subconscious idea shines through.

How far along are you with the new record?

I feel like I'm in the last quarter. There's a bunch of lyrics that need to be finished. It's getting close and it's feeling good: I'm feeling excited about it being a journey.

I loved the renditions of the two songs in the recent Fender Sessions videos. Both, but particularly 'Turning Green'. On the record it's a very skeletal, percussive affair, verging twee. In the live video it shows its teeth: there's Hendrix and Sonic Youth in there. Has that version of 'Turning Green' always been there? Have you always been aware of it?

I think that song especially is a really good example of going into the studio with just a rough sketch and not the whole idea painted out. It started off a lot more guitar-based, but it actually sounded like another one of my old songs so we had to totally switch directions in the studio. So, in a way we deconstructed it in the studio and pieced it back together in this different way, and if that hadn't happened then it wouldn't have grown into what it's become now. There's a part of me that wishes I'd spent months with that older version, perfecting it, playing it live and then had gone into the studio to capture this awesome version. But I don't know: that's the thing about songwriting and recording that I do like: there are these different versions that exist and you might not have one version without the other, and I really love what ['Turning Green' has] grown into when it's performed live. It's become its own monster which I really love. It's my favourite song to perform when I'm playing with the band. I rarely play it solo, it's not as much of an adventure.

It hadn't occurred to me before I started reading for this interview that you play with your fingers rather than a pick. It made me rethink 'Before You Gotta Go', which has this gorgeous AM radio atmosphere on the record. You strip it back further in the video. Did you get lessons as a kid? Did anyone ever advise you against using your fingers?

I did have lessons and had an awesome teacher. I don't quite remember – I probably used a pick or something, and actually, I've started playing with a pick again these days. But 'Before You Gotta Go' will always be pick-less. I don't quite remember when I was learning, but I remember when I started playing solo, when I was eighteen or so, doing open mics and stuff, that I'd play an acoustic. I think it was the sound of the pick on the acoustic that I really didn't like. Performing solo, I kinda had to jump between rhythm with a little bit of lead, and there was something about having no pick that made it easier to jump around. So many people ask me about it and it's just such an unconscious thing.

It really contributes to the texture of the playing. Listening to the soundtrack record you did in 2023, I get this sense

that you enjoy the simple sound of the electric guitar. I can tell it's made by someone who loves the negative space of an electric guitar's sound: The tapering off of a single pluck's sound, for instance. Will you play more in the mould of [soundtrack]?

Yeah, hopefully. I think I will. I really loved making that album and performing it. We only did a few shows, a very small tour, around it. Whether it's under my name or under something else, I don't know, but I'm sure I'll do more of it. I find it a real challenge and it's a really cathartic process. So I'm sure I will at some point.

In the Fender video there's an anecdote about why you picked up a Jaguar: it was basically to accommodate the absence of a second guitarist. Can you elaborate on that for me? Is there a certain quality to the sound of a Jag that sits between the Tele and a Strat, for instance?

Yeah, I think it's just something to do with the resonance, which, you know, could also have to do obviously with effects and pedals as well. I think there was something that just felt extra chunky about the Jag. At that time I was playing with the guitarist Dan Luscombe [Dan Kelly, formerly of The Drones], who was on the first few records and toured with me a lot. He's one of my favourite guitar players. He couldn't do the next tour and it was really scary, because I kinda relied on him. I could just look at him and know that the solo part was taken care of because he's so good. I was like, "Oh my god, I have to learn to do that now, I have to step up". It was a good exercise of learning how to mash those things together, those parts together. I think I've always done that a little bit, just from jumping between solo and playing a lot as a three-piece, but something about having that other guitarist maybe made me a bit lazy or something. Also I had to learn his parts because he played a lot of that stuff on the early records, so I kinda made my own frankenstein versions of his guitar solos. It was a challenge but it was a really good learning curve. It's informed my guitar playing, I think.

Like you I'm a lefty and I grew up despising it - you could never just walk into a shop and pick up something off the wall. How was your experience as a young lefty guitarist?

I think I'm just so used to it. I'm used to there only being like three left-handed guitars in the store. It just means that I never find some old, rare, cool guitar. All the guitars I own are new and off the shelf, which is fine, but in a way it's made me not too fussy: I have to make do with what I have. Maybe there's something good about that. It's not a bad thing; there's always going to be a guitar somewhere.

You've played live in the interim, but it's been a while since the last record. What have you learned as a songwriter and touring musician during that time? Have there been any epiphanies?

I noticed that when I was out of the tour cycle and schedule, just how easy it is just to get lazy. I don't really practice, I just play, but I've been making a point of practicing and trying to learn new things, because I fall into these patterns where I rely on what I do. If I pick up a guitar I always go to the same chord or do the same thing. It's about trying to break those patterns a bit and trying to push myself out of that. Even just learning new chords, or learning inversions, or scales… just trying to be a bit more disciplined. It's a good goal to have.

Recently I bought a baritone guitar. It's so new that I haven't had much time to play with it, but it's been really fun. Just something like that, or playing with different tunings, the kind of ideas that spark from that unknown land creates so much space for ideas and accidents.

Especially for a finger picker. You generally use the conventional tuning, right?

Yep.

GETTY

What are the alternate tunings you've enjoyed playing in lately?

I think open G. I used to play slide guitar in a band, so I tuned to that – I think it was G. I did write a song two years ago, actually i haven't finished it – I'm really good at starting songs and not finishing them – that's in some sort of open tuning, I always forget, I have to check my notes whenever i work on it. But yes, it creates so much space, it tricks the brain and you just find yourself doing new things, even finding new melodies and stuff. I love it and I always say I want to do more in different tunings.

Does the rise of AI in the time since your last LP landed feel like an existential threat to musicians, either imminently or now? Are you personally worried?

That's a big conversation. I don't know, but I think that people are always going to come back to a human connection. I don't know how to articulate this, but there's something really timeless about the realness of playing, or of writing, or of connecting with people's stories on an empathetic level. I think all that stuff is pretty fascinating and the conversations around it are fascinating, but I think music, like real music, and all kinds of performance is always going to shine through when all the computers fall apart; when the world, you know, burns to the ground. There's going to be one guitar left, and we'll have to listen to that.

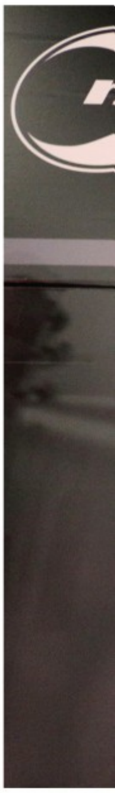
That's a sentiment that a lot of people share: there's no way computers and AI can replace human artistry.

Yeah, I mean, they can do everything, but that's not what makes it interesting. I was on holiday in Greece and I got a ticket at the last minute to see Kraftwerk, and it was such an awesome show. But my favorite part was when someone on stage made the tiniest mistake. Someone fumbled on a keyboard. Because [when you see a group like Kraftwerk] I think you're like, "well, it's all programmed", or there's so much that's on the grid or synced up to something or whatever, but then there was this one little mistake. It didn't break me out in a bad way: It made me appreciate how good the rest of the show had been. It made them really. It was something about it that I loved.

Courtney Barnett's Fender Session can be viewed at au.fender.com.

SUPER
HANDC
ELECTRIC
MADE
SPECIAL
Gilbert

The author with a Mark Gilbert guitar; tones from Tassie



EVENT REPORT

MELBOURNE GUITAR SHOW 2025

THE BIG EVENT RETURNED IN MARCH WITH A NEW VENUE, NEW VIBES AND A LOT OF NEW GEAR.

By Peter Hodgson

THE MELBOURNE GUITAR Show took place on March 1 and 2, bringing the latest and greatest to Australian guitarists. Having attended, performed at and hosted Q&A sessions at previous MGS events, I was curious to see how the switch to a new venue would change the vibes. The biggest and best change was placing everything on one level; no more lining up at the escalators to pop upstairs to see the acoustic room or catch a performance on the main stage. And the flow-on result was a more relaxed, social and fun experience.

There are four main aspects to the MGS: the gear, the seminars, the performances and the hangs. There are the latest products, including advance previews of stuff that isn't in Australian stores yet, like the phenomenal new Marshall pedals replicating the JCM800 and JCM900, DSL, JVM and Plexi. Or the only LTD Mick Thomson MT-I signature model guitar in circulation. You can listen to talks on topics like songwriting, guitar maintenance and pedal stacking. You can catch performances by the likes of Dallas Frasca, Dallas Crane (big Dallas year apparently), Brett Garsed and many more. And like NAMM or PAX or any number of conventions, you get to catch up with your buddies, meet reps from your favourite makers, strike up a conversation with a guitar legend in the coffee line.

Everywhere I looked at the Melbourne Guitar Show I would see something else cool and unusual. At the expansive Mannys booth I found an Ibanez J.Custom Australis 50th Anniversary RG made for the Australian market and featuring Aussie timbers. I saw a selection of Fender Custom Shop instruments including a beautiful lefty Strat that was so perfectly crafted that I almost wish I was born left-handed. I checked out the work of local gear builders like KINK pedals, Maton and Cole Clark. I saw stuff you rarely see in down here like James Tyler guitars (I checked out one that was $18,000 and felt like every cent of it). Curios like the Dean Kerry King signature model with its aggressive pointy bits and mean matte finish, or the impeccably hand-crafted MLJACKIE pickups with their vast array of models and cover options. Headless MOOER guitars. A Powers Electric Guitars A-Type built by the Taylor Guitars design legend (and it is seriously one of the lightest and most resonant guitars I've ever met).

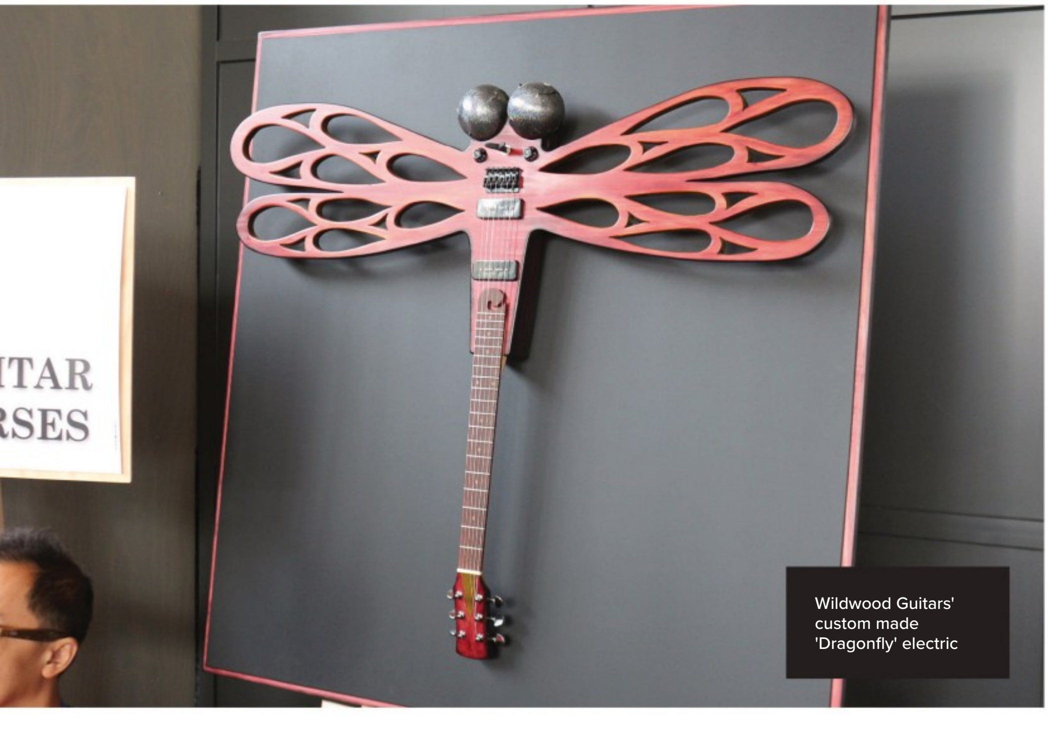
One of the most impressive instruments I got my paws on was a beautiful guitar built by Mark Gilbert, a Hobart guitar builder who uses Australian timbers to create investment-grade guitars that play as good as they look. I plugged in a Tele-style build with P90 pickups and featuring artwork of the legendary Albert Collins. I fretted the 7th fret of the low E string to test the volume

> **"One of the most impressive instruments I got my paws on was a beautiful guitar built by Mark Gilbert, a Hobart guitar builder who uses Australian timbers to create investment-grade guitars that play as good as they look."**

The long-awaited Mick Thomson signature LTD MT-I

Local industry legend Phil Ceberano delivering truths

Major guitar brands were in attendance, including Ibanez



Wildwood Guitars' custom made 'Dragonfly' electric

of the Carr Lincoln amp and with the barest nudge of the pick the note bloomed forth with heavenly sustain cascading into perfectly controlled feedback. I was hooked.

On the seminar side of things, Something For Kate's Paul Dempsey spoke with journalist Greg Phillips for the 30th anniversary of Australian Musician Magazine (and 31st of SFK), sharing his wisdom and playing acoustic versions of classics like 'Monsters.' Rock Academy Australia's Phil Ceberano gave a wide-ranging and hilariously expletive-laden presentation that touched on everything from navigating your pedalboard to overcoming stage fright, rocking his trusty modified and heavily played Fender Strat Plus. Modern Musician hosted a guitar maintenance workshop that was so informative that I stopped by to catch it again on the second day. YouTuber Leon Todd was all over the show giving presentations and ripping out killer licks (you should have heard that due play on a Fender Jack White Triplecaster: that guitar can absolutely shred when needed to).

The main stage hosted a huge variety of performers and special events. Rock Academy's students played some killer covers including a 'Killing In The Name Of' that brought the house down. I didn't get a chance to catch Phil Ceberano, Marcel Yammouni and Brett Kingman's Ultimate Guitar Tone Challenge but hoo boy, those guys talking tone? I feel sick I missed that one. Minnie Marks' incredible blues guitar and elaborate foot-played drum kit? That was unforgettable. And Paul Mason capped off the weekend with a tribute to Jeff Beck featuring the legendary Brett Garsed. If you ever have the chance to watch Brett play up close you're going to see the most relaxed, every-note-tucked-perfectly-in-its-place guitar playing you can imagine. And Mason's Beck-isms are spot on. Incredible stuff.

And on the social side, I had a great time catching up with friends I haven't seen since the last guitar show, buddies I know from gigs and jams, and reps from various brands I've worked with or reviewed over the years. I chatted with Andrea Krakovska about her upcoming Aerial Guitar show in Melbourne (think shred meets P!NK), bantered with CMI's Tim Gauci about the interest in the Mick Thomson LTD, checked out Japanese Telecasters with Mitch Cowen, and just generally nerded out with anyone who was up for a chat. And for all the great gear, amazing performances and insightful seminars, it's still the people who make the Melbourne Guitar Show great. The connection to other musicians, other dreamers, other gear-obsessives, other songwriters, other people who feel this passion in the same way. I can't wait for next year.

MY LIFE IN THREE GUITARS: ORIANTHI

THE TRIO OF AXES THAT HAVE MEANT THE MOST TO THE FORMER ALICE COOPER GUITARIST

By Mark McStea

ORIANTHI'S DEBUT SOLO album, 2005's Violet Journey, immediately put the guitar community on notice that a major new talent had arrived. Her unique blend of blues-fueled virtuosity turned heads from the very start, leading to countless endorsements from major-league gear manufacturers. The subsequent years have seen her release four more highly acclaimed albums; in fact, we caught up with her as she was completing work on her sixth album, which is due sometime this year.

This means we managed to find a spot in Ori's hectic schedule to discuss the three guitars that have meant the most to her over her career. "I've got so many guitars that mean a lot to me for all kinds of reasons, but I guess — when push comes to shove — these are the three I always return to.

"I still find myself on guitar-hunting expeditions when I get a day off on tour, but if I could only own three guitars, these are the three that would make the cut."

1 Maton

Australian EA80C

"This was the first guitar I bought for myself, when I was 14. My dad had bought me a few other guitars before, but I managed to finally get enough money together to buy this. I thought that the fact that Maton was Australian was cool. They're such a great brand — such well-made guitars. I brought it over to America with me, and the wood got cracked during the flight. It holds a lot of great memories for me, sitting and writing with it in those early years. I came up with all the songs for *Violet Journey*, which got me the deal with Jimmy Iovine, on this guitar. I actually started out on an old, beat-up classical guitar that my dad had, that he was happy to let me play. He didn't trust me with his Gibsons and Fenders at that time. Then, when I was seven, he gave me his cherry red Gibson ES-125, on the condition that I only used it at home. He was always telling me to be very careful with it — it was a really beautiful guitar. It was a left-handed hollow body — my dad is left-handed — so we converted it to right-handed, which was actually kind of weird. I would sneak it out to school after my dad left for work, but he came home early one day and saw me coming back in with it. I was busted, and he was shocked at first, but I told him that I'd played a song I'd written at school assembly and I had some friends dancing with me. I think he was impressed that it was like a proper show, so that got me off the hook. I was really spoiled as a kid when it came to guitars; after he gave me the 125, he gave me a red Fender Strat and then a PRS. My parents could see how dedicated and serious I was about playing the guitar when I was a child. I guess they thought I probably wasn't going to be able to do anything else except maybe feed the animals in a zoo, so maybe I could become a guitar player. My dad was a real tone freak and guitar obsessive, and I think that's where I got my obsession from."

2 PRS

Custom 24 (one-off)

"You can plug this guitar into anything, and it sounds amazing. I've played it next to a '59 Les Paul for comparison, and also next to my '62 ES-335, and it sounded just as good. It's got Paul [Reed Smith]'s special pickups that sound really full; it sustains wonderfully. It's a real workhorse; it never goes out of tune. There are so many unique details about this model. It's got mother-of-pearl all over it — it was specially flown out for the guitar. There's pink mother-of-pearl and all kinds of extravagant stuff on the neck, and my "O" symbol is also made from the same material. The entire guitar is made from one piece of Brazilian rosewood, so it's very heavy. I love vintage guitars, but taking them on the road causes me anxiety, because I worry about someone stealing them, but this purple PRS has been everywhere with me. It's definitely my Number 1 guitar. I actually buy a seat on the plane for it. It travels with me everywhere; it stays with me in my hotel room. It is literally with me all the time; it's a bit psychotic, I guess. I've had five guitars stolen from me, and when you love something the way I love this guitar, you don't take chances. I played the national anthem at a football game in Miami in 2009 on a Les Paul with a Floyd Rose. I turned my back for five minutes and it got stolen from behind me. I've had four great PRS guitars stolen as well. That's why I make sure if I'm taking this guitar with me anywhere, it stays right by my side."

> **"I've had five guitars stolen from me, and when you love something the way I love this guitar, you don't take chances"**

3 Gibson

SJ-200 (signature)

"It was a huge honor to be asked to collaborate with such an historic company. On top of that, to then be told that my model is their third-best-selling SJ-200 ever, after Elvis and Bob Dylan — what stellar company to be in! — is just really amazing. According to Gibson, they're so popular that they've been on back order for five years, which is mind-blowing. I'm working with them to produce an Epiphone version, as the Gibson model is a little on the expensive side. Having said that, the expense is justifiable, with the quality of the wood and the extras like the crystals, and we spent a long time developing the LR Baggs pickups. It also has a built-in compressor. Basically, if the sound guy passes out drunk or something, you can fix everything from the guitar. Everybody asked me why I picked such a big guitar, but it just sounds like a grand piano. The sound is huge, and the tonal spectrum is so broad, it's just immense. When you're accompanying yourself, playing an acoustic gig, the worst thing for me is that horrible, thin sound you often hear. You need the sound to be fully rounded out, and the Baggs pickup captures every detail of the full-bodied sound of the guitar. I wanted something that had a neck that was a bit more like an electric guitar — I always found regular acoustic necks a bit too chunky. I'd played an ES-345 with what seemed like the ideal neck, and that was the inspiration for the neck on my signature model. It's been really cool to collaborate with Robi Johns at Gibson — he's an amazing luthier. His wife is into crystals, as am I, so we immediately connected. I said I wanted amethyst on the controls, and he just said OK, whatever you want — that was just for my own Number 1 model; the others have mother-of-pearl instead, though there is an option to have crystals. I thought we'd better give people a choice as not everyone is as into crystals as I am!"

1. COURTESY OF ORIANTHI 2. RICK DIAMOND/GETTY IMAGES FOR SKYVILLE 3. GIBSON BRANDS

1

1
Maton
MADE IN AUSTRALIA

3

2

"It's crazy going from the Sinatra shows... to playing in clubs with my heaviest band," Mark Tremonti says. "It's definitely a different vibe"

Tracking Down Tremonti

WHETHER HE'S PLOTTING WITH CREED, ALTER BRIDGE OR HIS EPONYMOUS SOLO PROJECT, MARK TREMONTI IS ALWAYS UP TO SOMETHING INTERESTING. TODAY IT'S ALL ABOUT GEAR, HIS IN-THE-WORKS PEDAL COMPANY AND LATEST ALBUM, *THE END WILL SHOW US HOW*

By Gregory Adams

THE END IS near, but time is on Mark Tremonti's side. It's got to be — he planned it this way. When we reach the legendary Floridian guitar force in late November 2024, he's just stepped into a Toronto hotel room on a day off from Creed's extremely successful and rapturously received reunion tour, which packed arenas throughout much of the year. To say he's caught during a moment of downtime, however, might be a stretch.

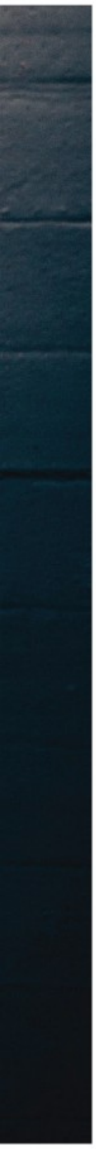
Once this interview wraps, he'll be warming up his voice in preparation for another round of "Tremonti Sings Sinatra" shows, black-tie events where he smoothly croons Ol' Blue Eyes' standards. He's also touching up some songs he wrote for an upcoming album with Alter Bridge, his other long-running and beloved hard rock project. He may QC a pair of wah-styled prototypes for a long-promised pedal-making project. He and his family are going to sneak in some Christmas shopping while wandering through the Canadian metropolis, too.

Even after tackling all that, the guitarist will be sitting in the hotel relearning rhythmically crushing riffs from *The End Will Show Us How*, the latest album from his eponymous and more metallically tinged Tremonti project. He'd made sure to finish that record at the top of 2024 to avoid conflicts with Creed's weighty tour schedule, but the pendulum is swinging back toward the musical multi-tasker's heaviest outfit for 2025.

"In my now very-layered career with all these bands, I've got to work about a year and a half ahead of schedule to make sure everything's on time," he says of an ever-morphing creative flow.

Throughout *The End Will Show Us How*, Tremonti and the rest of his group — co-guitarist Eric Friedman, bassist Tanner Keegan and drummer Ryan Bennett — are a wrecking ball of kineticism. They're smashing darkly anthemic choruses into ominously quarter-bent alt-rock gloom

CHUCK BRUECKMANN



("The Mother, the Earth and I"); they're busting out bare-knuckled baritone riffage alongside pinch-and-burn soloing ("One More Time," "Nails"). But while generally several shades heavier than Creed or Alter Bridge, *End* also unveils tender rock balladry ("It's Not Over").

First single "Just Too Much" may be the record's most unique surprise. Sporting an infectiously quirky verse groove built around alternating 8- and 9-bar phrases, the song passed Friedman and Tremonti's smell test immediately. Perhaps more irregular to the band leader was how his wife was an instant fan, too.

"That was one of the only songs I've ever worked on in my studio where my wife was like, 'What was that thing you were playing last night? That was really cool!' " Tremonti says through a hearty laugh. "She thought it was Audioslave-ish, which is one of her favorite bands. So I was like, 'All right, we're onto something!' "

You've called "The Mother, the Earth and I" one of your favorite songs you've ever done with this band. Pardon the pun, but what makes it so elementally "Tremonti"?

I heard the initial demos back and it just hit a spot with me. And when it kicks into the chorus chord progression, that's musically the most satisfying part to play. I like setting up an atmosphere and finding a lyric that fits the mood. When I was writing this song, I just spit out those lyrics. I thought it would be a fun thing to tackle, this love for the earth. Finding beauty and peace in nature while the world is in shambles, and everybody's killing for religion and politics. It's about sitting back in that tranquility of the earth itself… that's something we all share, no matter what you believe.

"One More Time" kicks off with a gnarly, gun-turreted rhythm riff that locks in with a monstrous double kick. It's one of the heaviest grooves on the record.

That's signature Tremonti. Whenever I have a riff in a rhythm that needs to stay super tight, and it has an almost speed metal-y approach to it, that's definitely earmarked for Tremonti. If I brought that to [*Creed bassist and drummer*] Scott Phillips and Brian Marshall, they'd look at me funny. They like rock. They like progressive rock. But I don't know if they like speed metal as much as I do. So I do as much of that as possible with Tremonti. That's one of the main reasons I started this band — to be able to get that side of my songwriting out. They don't have to be heavy, but that's definitely a flavor of this band.

There's this bending lick you do in the bridge breakdown of "One More Time" that had one YouTube commenter asking, "Did I just get Weezer-ed?" because it shares a similar feel to the end of Rivers Cuomo's solo on "Buddy Holly." Had you come across that comparison yet?

No… I'm not too familiar with Weezer. I'd have to go back and listen to it, but it's definitely not a tribute to Weezer. [*Laughs*]

Parallel thoughts, perhaps. A good lick is a good lick!

It's just rock 'n' roll! There are 12 notes; it's all been done. When that lick came together for "One More Time," I thought it was great for the song. It wasn't because I was listening to a Weezer record, I'll tell you that much. [*Laughs*]

A while ago you talked up your love for the clean channel of your PRS MT 100 head. Did that end up being the primary clean tone on The End Will Show Us How?

The MT 100 is the primary amp in general. Our producer Elvis [*ed. Michael "Elvis" Baskette*], absolutely loves that amp. That being said, I've always been a firm believer in having multiple amps doing any given job. It's been a career-long quest for me, pairing amps to find these perfect marriages between tones.

"It's just rock 'n' roll! There are 12 notes; it's all been done. When that lick came together for "One More Time," I thought it was great for the song."

We had the MT 100, and I brought in a couple of new Dumbles that I love. I honestly think there's no better tone in the world than a slightly overdriven Dumble. When you mix that with the MT 100, it's just bliss to me. And then Elvis loves my Cornford RK100, so I brought that in for layering the high-gain rhythms and leads. I think we had it all covered between those three or four amps.

A while back, you'd started teasing the idea of producing your own pedals. Where are you at with that project?

Just yesterday I tried out two pedals, but I'm trying to be as picky as I can and not pull the trigger until I'm perfectly happy with it. I'm trying to come up with something cool that's also very affordable and road-worthy. When you put your name on something, you've got to make sure it's right. We've been at it for a few years… but we'll get there.

What were you testing out, specifically?

They were two wah pedals, but we've worked on a tremolo, a Uni-Vibe-type of pedal, and a dual overdrive; I love the idea of a stackable overdrive. I also want to do an octave pedal at some point, but the parts are a little tougher to come by than you would think. So, it's been [*about*] hunting some of that down. I want to come out with three pedals when it launches and then come out with a pedal a year after that.

How much octave pedal work is on this record?

Any time there's a big, single-string heavy riff, there's got to be some kind of layered octave on there. What we usually do in that case is we'll put a layer of Micro Synth in there, too. Micro Synths have some of the nastiest fuzz tones. If you listen to "All the Wicked Things," there's a section in the bridge where it drops to a real heavy single-string riff. I'd be surprised if we didn't layer some sort of octave on there.

How excited are you to start promoting this record with Tremonti? That's going to be a different vibe than these Creed arena shows…

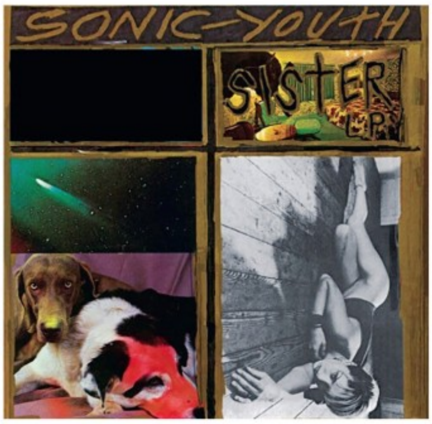
Oh, absolutely. All my bands feel so different. It's crazy going from the Sinatra shows, where I'm wearing a tux and playing with all of these incredibly gifted performers, to going over to Europe and playing in clubs with my heaviest band. It's definitely a different vibe. You've got to take a different approach. I can't get on stage with Tremonti and be like, "Hey, you all look beautiful tonight, thank you for coming to the event," like I would with a Sinatra performance.

Maybe you're underselling the power of that. Everyone loves a compliment!

I feel like when I do Tremonti, I become a different character. When it's heavier music, I become a WWE wrestler: "Get up, everybody!" Whatever the music pulls out of you, you know…

On the idea of pulling out music through these different personas, is there any other music you're working on at the moment? Whether with Alter Bridge, Creed or Tremonti?

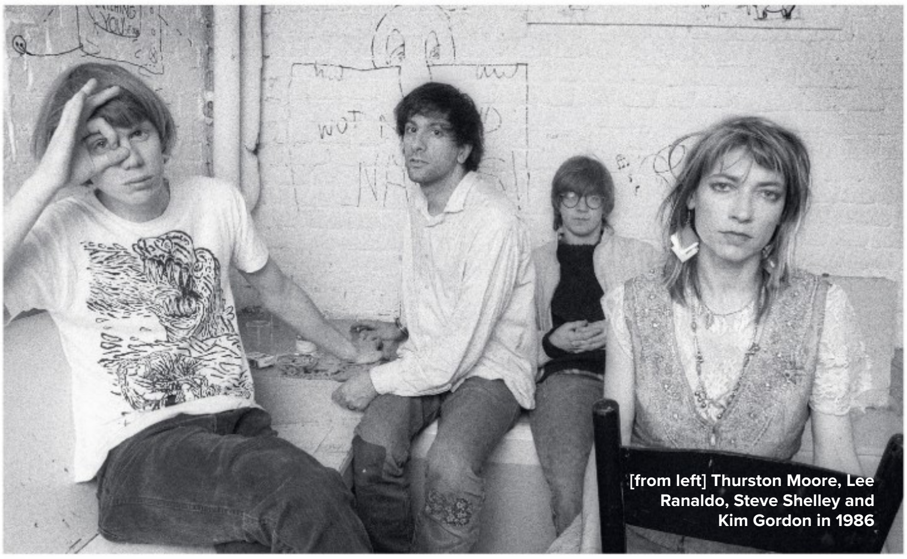
I'm going into the studio with Alter Bridge in March. I put together nine demos last month that I've shared with everybody. I'm always thinking about volume two of *Tremonti Sings Sinatra*. Every record that we put out [*donates proceeds*] to the National Down Syndrome Society, so I want to keep raising funds for that. And it's also just a lot of fun to do. We're still looking at what happens [*in 2025*] with the Tremonti tours, stateside. And then we're looking at Creed as well. We'll see how it all pans out!



LOST CLASSICS: SONIC YOUTH

NYC NOISE-ROCK PIONEER THURSTON MOORE RECALLS THE MAKING OF 1987'S *SISTER* AND HIS LATEST ALBUM, 2024'S *FLOW CRITICAL LUCIDITY*

By Mark McStea


[from left] Thurston Moore, Lee Ranaldo, Steve Shelley and Kim Gordon in 1986

FRANS SCHELLEKENS/REDFERNS

SISTER, RELEASED IN 1987, is widely acclaimed as Sonic Youth's best album. At the time of its release, it was acknowledged as a step up for the New York City alt-rockers in terms of writing and sonic quality. *Evol*, released the previous year, had already served notice that the band was moving toward a more mainstream sound. *Sister* was the record that made good on that promise, delivering commerciality without compromise.

Guitarists Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo had already adopted a wildly experimental approach to their playing, inventing unique alternative tunings, using prepared guitars — with drumsticks wedged under the strings (among a number of radical approaches) — and playing behind the bridge. The fact that they could weld such radical unconventionality to songs that delivered memorable melodies and solid hooks was a testament to their creative prowess.

***Sister* is often cited as one of the key albums of the Eighties. How do you feel about it these days?**

I knew we were moving into a territory that was possibly less reckless than the previous albums we'd recorded. We were more focused on concision as far as songwriting was concerned. At that point, when I was in my late twenties, I remember thinking we were becoming more refined and sophisticated as a band, in the context of what kind of band we had been. By that, I mean one that isn't defined in the traditional high technique bands dealt in. I think *Sister* was when we were able to combine what we were doing with alternate-tuned guitars and alternate song structure into more accessibility for a broader listenership. I think it marked us entering a new era of sophisticated sonic songwriting. I think we were allowing ourselves to grow up in public.

In terms of the writing, would all the songs have been fully formed before going into the studio, or did things change a lot once it came to putting the songs down?

I think everything was definitely fully formed. We had it together. We knew we had to be as ready as possible because we were recording at Sear Sound [*in New York City*], which was something of a bespoke studio. It cost a bit of coin, so we had to make sure we were acting responsibly toward our budget. [*Laughs*] We went in there knowing there was no time to fool around — and we were ready. We had rehearsed that material quite a bit in a very tiny room on the Lower East Side. The room was so small that we couldn't turn the amps up loud. It meant we had to play fairly quietly, and in a way, I think that defined how that record sounded. There were no blasters on there except maybe "White Cross" and "Hot Wire My Heart." The songs had a contained, linear quality, which continued as an aspect of the band for our subsequent albums.

What was the process in terms of you and Lee dividing the guitar parts?

It was totally organic. A lot of songs were predicated on me bringing up riff ideas that I would have come up with in my apartment with Kim [*Gordon, bass*]. Once I brought them into the rehearsal room, Lee, Kim and Steve [*Shelley, drums*] were free to create their own ideas around the structure. Lee brought in "Pipeline/Kill Time," which was fully composed by him, but again, we were all free to play what we wanted. Nobody ever brought in a song and said, "Look, this is how you have to play that part" or whatever. You could never be precious with a song you brought to the band. You'd show it to your wolf brothers, and they'd tear into it. [*Laughs*] That was why none of our records had "lyrics by" or "music by" or whatever. They were all credited to Sonic Youth. Everything that everybody contributed was of equal value.

Did you make the album quickly? Were you a first-take kind of band?

We did work very quickly on that record because, as I mentioned, the studio time was expensive at Sear Sound. I think, in general, we'd usually go for about six takes of a song before it started to become stiff. I was very into expediency, but very rarely do I recall us getting a song that was perfect on the first take. I was always keen on getting in and out of the studio; I always felt it was a bit like being in a boat on a lake where you can never escape. [*Laughs*]

What were the main guitars you and Lee were using at the time?

I was still playing a Fender Duo-Sonic that I'd got for a couple of hundred dollars. I always thought it looked a little dinky though on my six-foot-six-inch body. [*Laughs*] But around the time we started the album, we had gotten into Jazzmasters and Jaguars. We were moving away from the junk-store guitars we'd been using, like old Hagstroms and Harmonies. They were falling apart on us. We stuck with Fender. Lee was also using a Telecaster on the album. I felt very in tune with the Jazzmaster. I think the longer neck it has — compared to the Duo-Sonic — was the key. We'd been looking at new guitars as we'd made some money from touring. I remember Lee pointing at a Jazzmaster on the wall in a store and saying that's the guitar Tom Verlaine uses, and I thought that was good enough for me. I still play a Jazzmaster all the time — even now.

You and Lee were renowned for using alternate tunings which you had created. How did that come about?

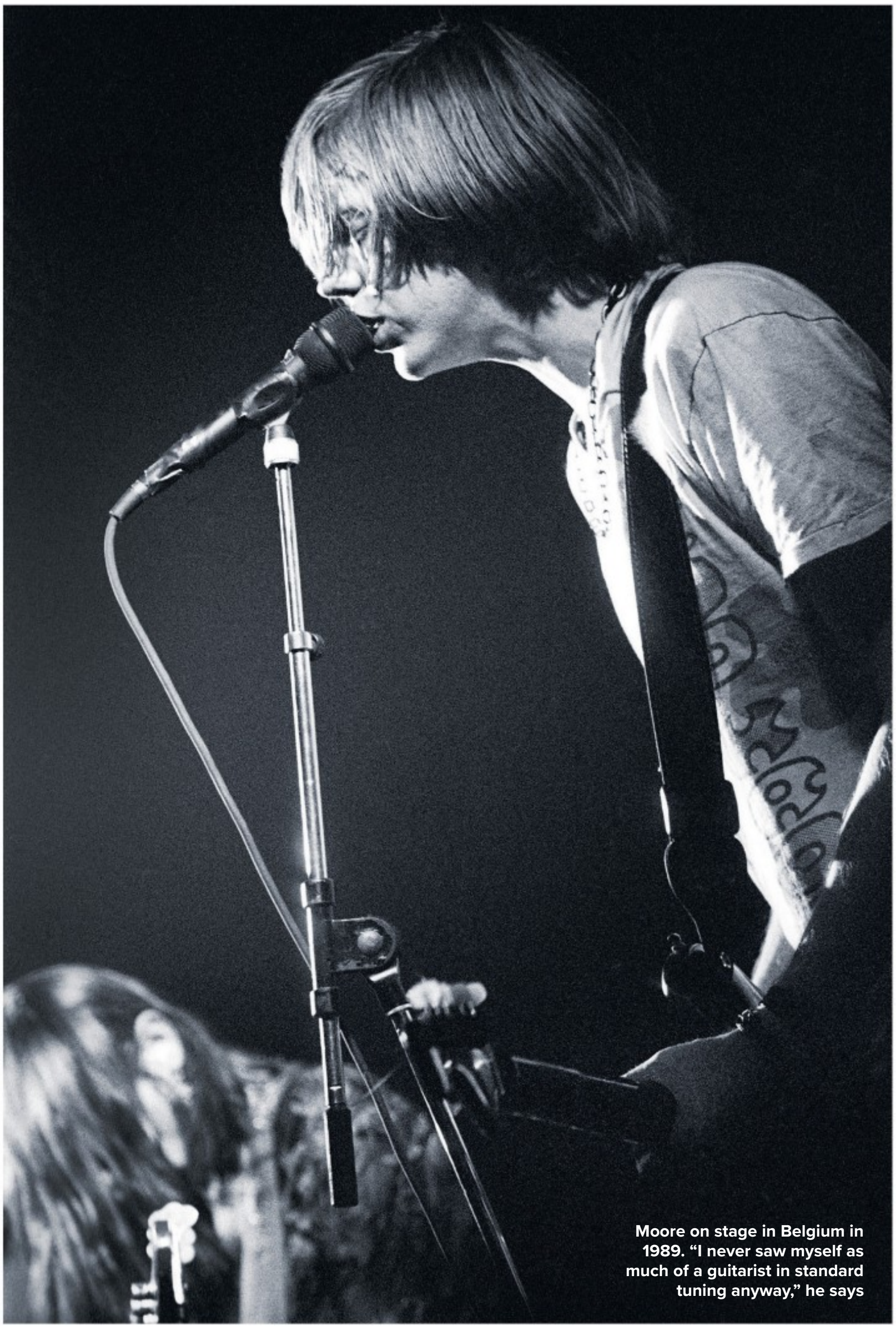
The first album [*1983's* Confusion Is Sex] was in traditional standard tuning, funnily enough. We were aware of musicians using different tunings in downtown New York in the scene we were in — the art-rock composers like Glenn Branca. I was amazed by that, but I didn't think it could be employed in a traditional rock band lineup. I remember saying to Glenn that [*our*] guitars were so bad that we couldn't really make them work for us. He came over to my apartment with six guitars, three under each arm — no cases or anything — and threw them onto the futon. [*Laughs*] It was amazing. He had one that had six .10-gauge strings all tuned to E, for example. We started to really delve into alternatives to standard tuning. I'd just strum the open strings and adjust them until I liked what it sounded like, and then I'd make a note of what the strings were tuned to in that tuning. This was before you could buy tuners very easily — I think all you could get were those big [*Conn*] Strobotuners. I used to tune Kim's bass to a Black Uhuru record, then tune our guitars based on that.

Given how many unconventional tunings you were using, did you ever find yourself getting lost, trying to remember where you were on the neck?

I never saw myself as much of a guitarist in standard tuning anyway; I never really engaged with traditional tuning. I didn't feel like I needed to express myself in that tuning and never felt comfortable in standard. In fact, in some ways I felt more under pressure because the world was so full of great players who were in standard, and I had no interest in trying to compete with them. I never really thought of myself as a guitar player until well into the game. My brother, who is five years older than me, is a great guitar player. He'd be shredding in his bedroom, and I'd sneak in sometimes to steal a guitar. I wanted to be a drummer, but I didn't have the coordination.

When you listen to *Sister* now, do you hear anything you wished you'd done differently?

It has a really nice resonant quality. Sear Sound was a wonderful studio, and I think that had a lot to do with the sound of the record. I wouldn't change a thing. When I hear about bands remastering a record, it makes my eyes go funny. [*Laughs*] Even when the Sonic Youth records were remastered, all I thought it did was make them louder, which I don't think is necessarily a good thing. It's kinda like the record is waving its arms in the air or something. Even worse is if a band tries to re-record an album years later because they think they can play it better. Big mistake. The clumsiness of youth is what makes a record what it is. There are parts on *Sister* that are sore-thumb moments, but that's the beauty — the bruises of your youth.



Moore on stage in Belgium in 1989. "I never saw myself as much of a guitarist in standard tuning anyway," he says

GIE KNAEPS/GETTY IMAGES

You've just released *Flow Critical Lucidity*, your first solo album in three years. I appreciate the way it combines peaceful, mellow ambience with a vaguely unsettling undercurrent.

Yeah, I guess that's right. I had recorded quite a lot of material for it. The sequence of the album is pretty much the songs that worked together with this gentle quality. I left a couple of wilder songs off the record as they were a little too jarring. I'm interested in investigating a more meditational aspect of rock music, and this record enabled me to do that. It allowed me to examine the meditational exchange between the creative impulse and the natural world — the woke world and the world of dreams. It was written during a residency I was doing in Switzerland. I knew I was going to be doing the album, so I wrote the songs over two weeks. I brought the rest of the musicians over from London; we set up in a small rehearsal unit and I'd show them my ideas. I recorded the songs on a Zoom recorder and was initially tempted to put them out [*in that format*], but I thought better of it. They were almost good enough, but once we got in the studio they became far more majestic.

Robin Nolan

HOW A GYPSY JAZZ BUSKER BECAME A FRIEND, INTERPRETER AND COLLABORATOR OF GEORGE HARRISON

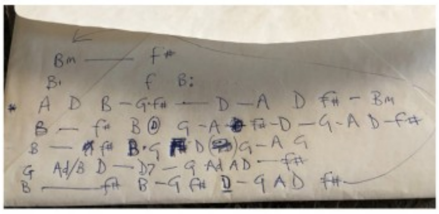
By Bill DeMain

ONE DAY IN 1994, gypsy jazz guitarist Robin Nolan was busking in Leidseplein, a lively square in Amsterdam. A tourist bought one of his CDs. “And he turned out to be George Harrison’s gardener,” Nolan says. “He gave the CD to George, thinking he might like it. The next thing I know George and Olivia [his wife] call to ask if we’d play at their Christmas party.”

There began a friendship, with Nolan’s combo becoming what he calls “the house band” for parties at Friar Park, the Harrisons’ home (and home studio) in England’s Thames Valley. “We played [their son] Dhani Harrison’s 21st birthday, and everyone there was famous except for us,” Nolan says with a laugh. “Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, Tom Petty, Ravi Shankar, the Monty Python members. We’d be doing our Django Reinhardt stuff and George would say, ‘Check these guys out!’ Our CD was in his jukebox with all his favorite music. We even got to play together. It was surreal.”

> **“With these songs, I was only thinking of George. I just wanted to play for him”**

Nolan is celebrating the friendship with For the Love of George, tasteful gypsy jazz re-imaginings of 10 Harrison and Beatles songs, plus the original title track — a virtual co-write with Harrison. That began with a texted pic Olivia sent Nolan of an envelope with a chord progression scribbled out in George’s hand. “I had to unravel the mystery of what he intended,” Nolan says. “As I played the changes, I kind of heard George’s voice humming in my head.” He sent a melodic idea to Olivia. “That was nerve-wracking. I thought, ‘God, she might hate it.’ But she texted back, “Oh, it sounds so George!’ Now the copyright says, ‘Harrison-Nolan.’ Unreal.” As if that’s not enough, Nolan recorded the album at Friar Park. Aside from his Polak Gypsy Swing 42N, he played what he calls the “crown jewels” of George’s collection. These include the Gibson J-160E, the Rickenbacker 360 12-string and the Ramirez gut-string heard on the Beatles’ “And I Love Her.”



Bm —— F#
B: F B:
* A D B — G·F# —— D — A D F# — Bm
B — F# B Ⓓ G — A ● F# — D — G — A D — F#
B — ~~F#~~ F# B·G ~~[illegible]~~ D ([illegible]) G — A G
G A/B D —— D7 — G Ad A D —— F#
B —— F# B — G F# D — G A D F#

[top] Robin Nolan plays George Harrison’s 1963 Rickenbacker 360 12-string. [above] Nolan turned a chord progression — written in George’s hand — into a new Harrison/Nolan song, “For the Love of George”

“When you put your fingers in the same place that George put his fingers on the same guitar from an epic recording from the Beatles, and it sounds the same, it blows you away,” he says.

Nolan will be touring this year while maintaining his educational outreach via his Gypsy Jazz Club instructional books and videos. Though the soulful fluidity of Django is integral to the new album, Nolan says, “Noodling or trying to shred was out the window. With these songs, I was only thinking of George. I just wanted to play for him.”

JASON ROGAN, COURTESY OF ROBIN NOLAN

Kenny Wayne Shepherd performs in Los Angeles, January 11, 2024

SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES

MY PEDALBOARD

KENNY WAYNE SHEPHERD

WHAT THE MODERN BLUES-ROCK ICON SEES WHEN HE LOOKS DOWN

"THE RECIPE IS, if it's not broken, don't fix it. A number of different things have come out, but I think we can universally agree that, for the most part, the new products in the pedal world are just different-colored housings of the same circuits we've all been using for decades.

"I'm using a primitive setup, but I haven't had many problems with it or had to make many repairs to it over the years. It comes from a need — or a desire — not to have to tap dance quite so much. For most of my show, I can get through with just the guitar and a couple of pedals — that's it. Most of my tone is just the guitar and the amp — but every single one of these pedals makes an appearance once or twice.

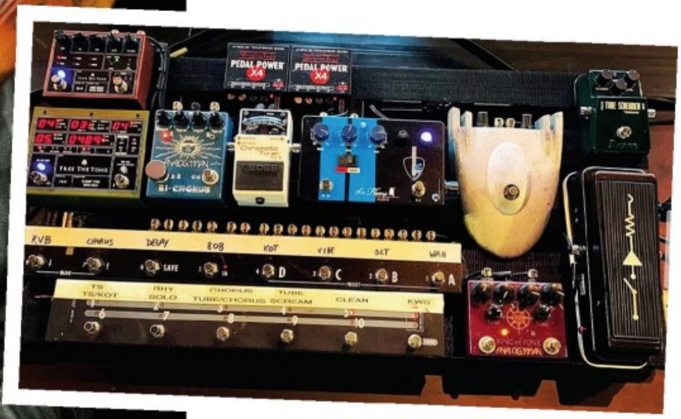
"I have a Boss TU-3 [*Chromatic*] tuner in the middle. On the one side, I've found that the Ibanez TS808 Tube Screamer works great as an overdrive, and my AnalogMan King of Tone overdrive is a staple in every pedalboard configuration I've ever had since that pedal came out.

"I've got a [*Thomas Vox*] Clyde McCoy wah and a Roger Mayer Spaceship version of the Octavia [*fuzz*]. I've used different ones over the years — and I have an original one — but the Roger Mayer is supposed to have a circuit that's authentic. Then I've got the [*Sir Henry by Tinsley Audio*] Univibe. My tech, Dustin Sears, makes those; it's the most faithful recreation of the vintage style you'll find anywhere. On the other side of the pedalboard, I've got an AnalogMan [*Standard*] Chorus. It's two choruses in one; I can also have a slow speed for a Leslie sound and a regular chorus.

"I've also got a Free the Tone [*Ambi Space*] Digital Reverb and a Free the Tone [*Flight Time*] Digital Delay. The whole thing is controlled by two Voodoo Lab [*Pedal Power x4 4-output Isolated Guitar Pedal*] power supplies and a Voodoo Lab pedal-selector switching system. Like I said, it's a primitive setup. I put that on the board when I was experimenting with them when they first came out in the early 2000s. It's working fine and has been relatively bulletproof. It takes up a lot of real estate, and my board could be much smaller without it, but it works, it's programmed with what I want it to do, and I don't have to worry about it."

Andrew Daly

"For most of my show, I can get through with just the guitar and a couple of pedals — that's it"



IF I HAD TO CHOOSE ONLY ONE PEDAL FOR A FULL SHOW:
"The King of Tone pedal — without a doubt!"

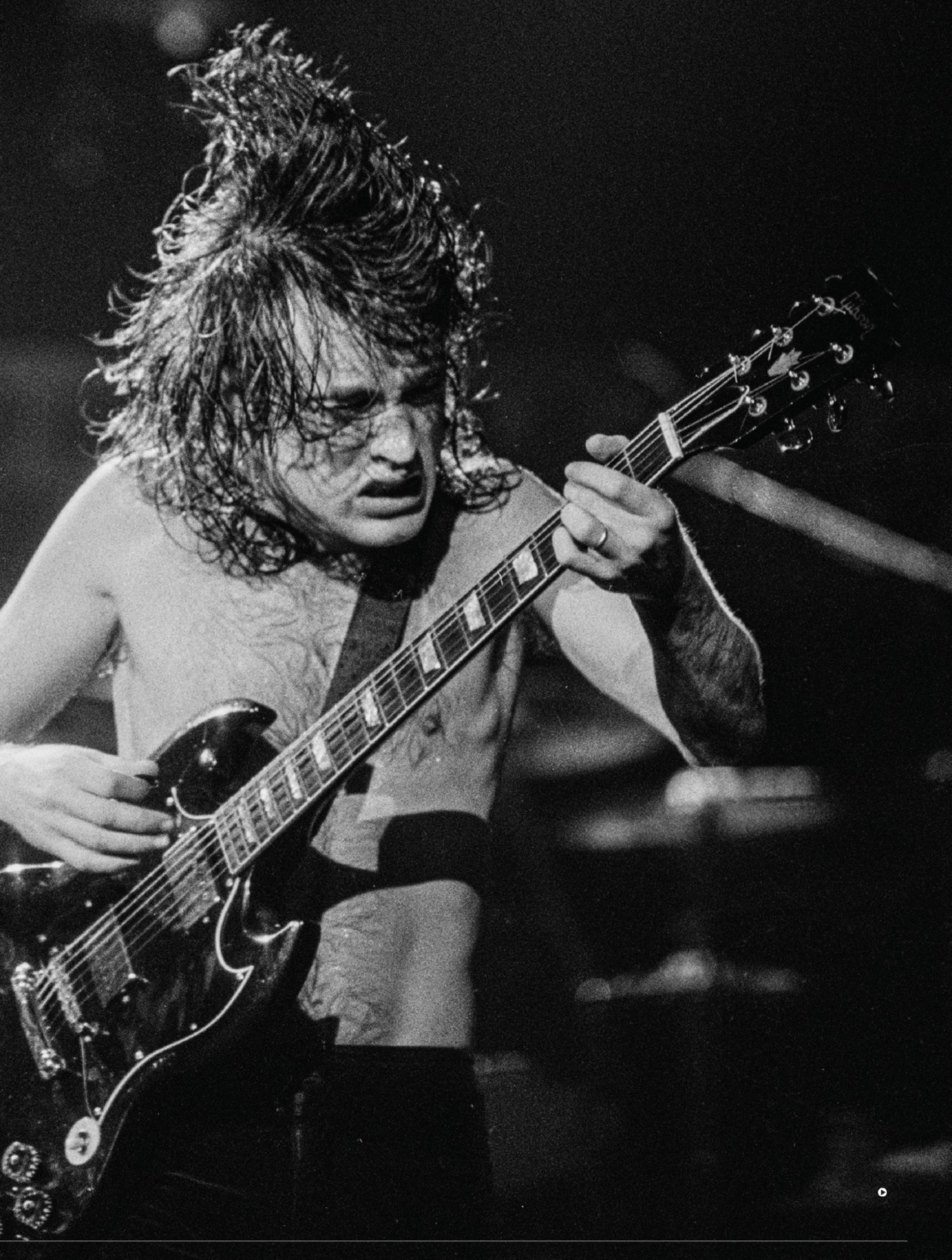
45 YEARS OF *BACK IN BLACK*

Black to the Future

The death of AC/DC frontman Bon Scott in February 1980 looked like it might've also dealt a fatal blow to the band. But then they got a new singer and made a career-rejuvenating record that became the biggest-selling rock album of all time — *Back in Black*

By Paul Elliott

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES


Gibson

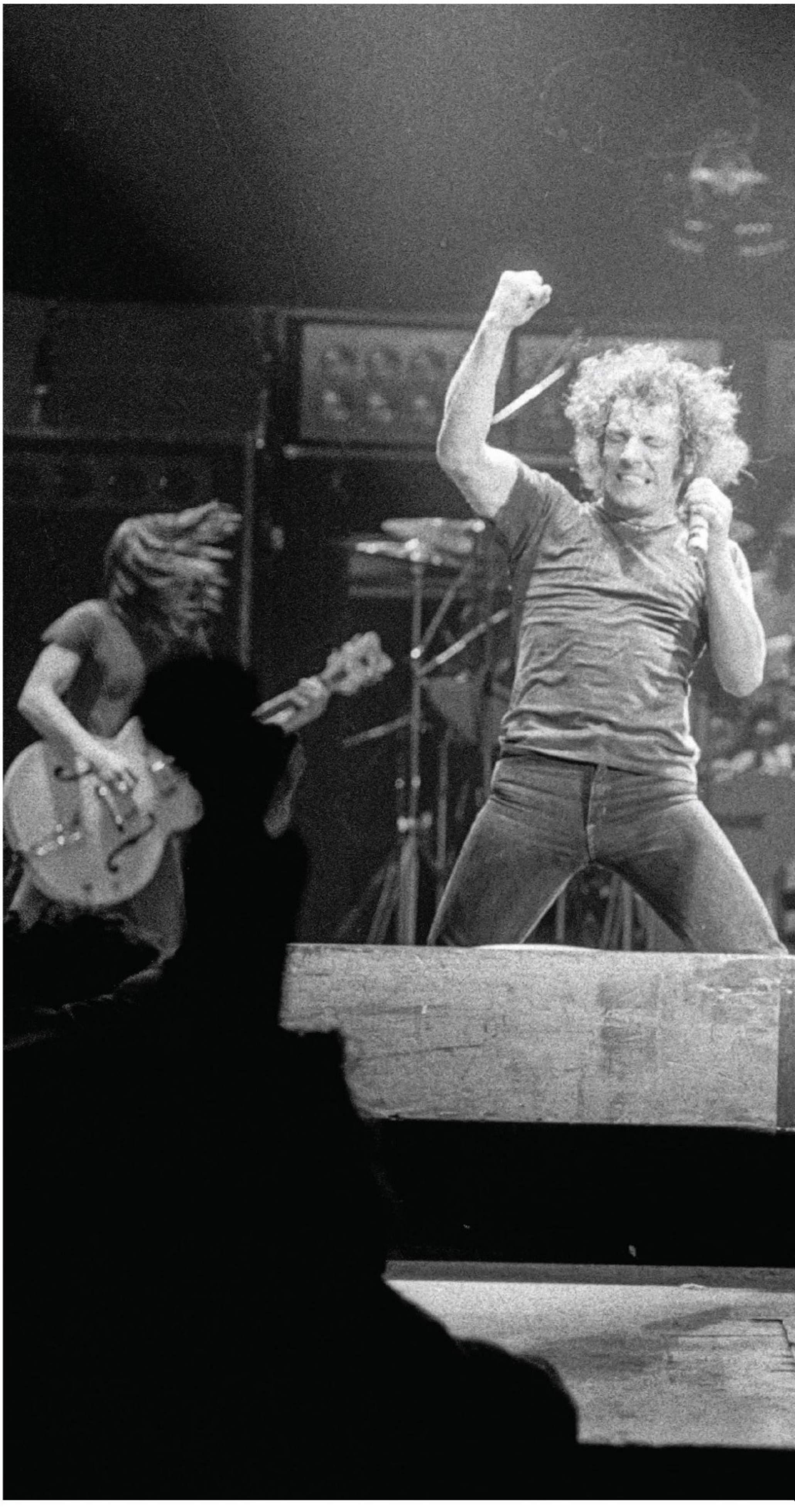
FOR ANGUS YOUNG, the pre-show ritual was the same as it had always been. In the dressing room backstage at the Palais des Expositions in the Belgian city of Namur, AC/DC's lead guitarist changed out of jeans and T-shirt and put on his schoolboy uniform, went for a piss and had one last cigarette to take the edge off his nerves. But this was no ordinary gig. On this evening, June 29, 1980, AC/DC were about to perform in public for the first time with their new singer, Brian Johnson. And in the last few minutes before going on stage, as Angus looked around the room, he could see the tension in Johnson's face. "He was shitting himself," Angus said.

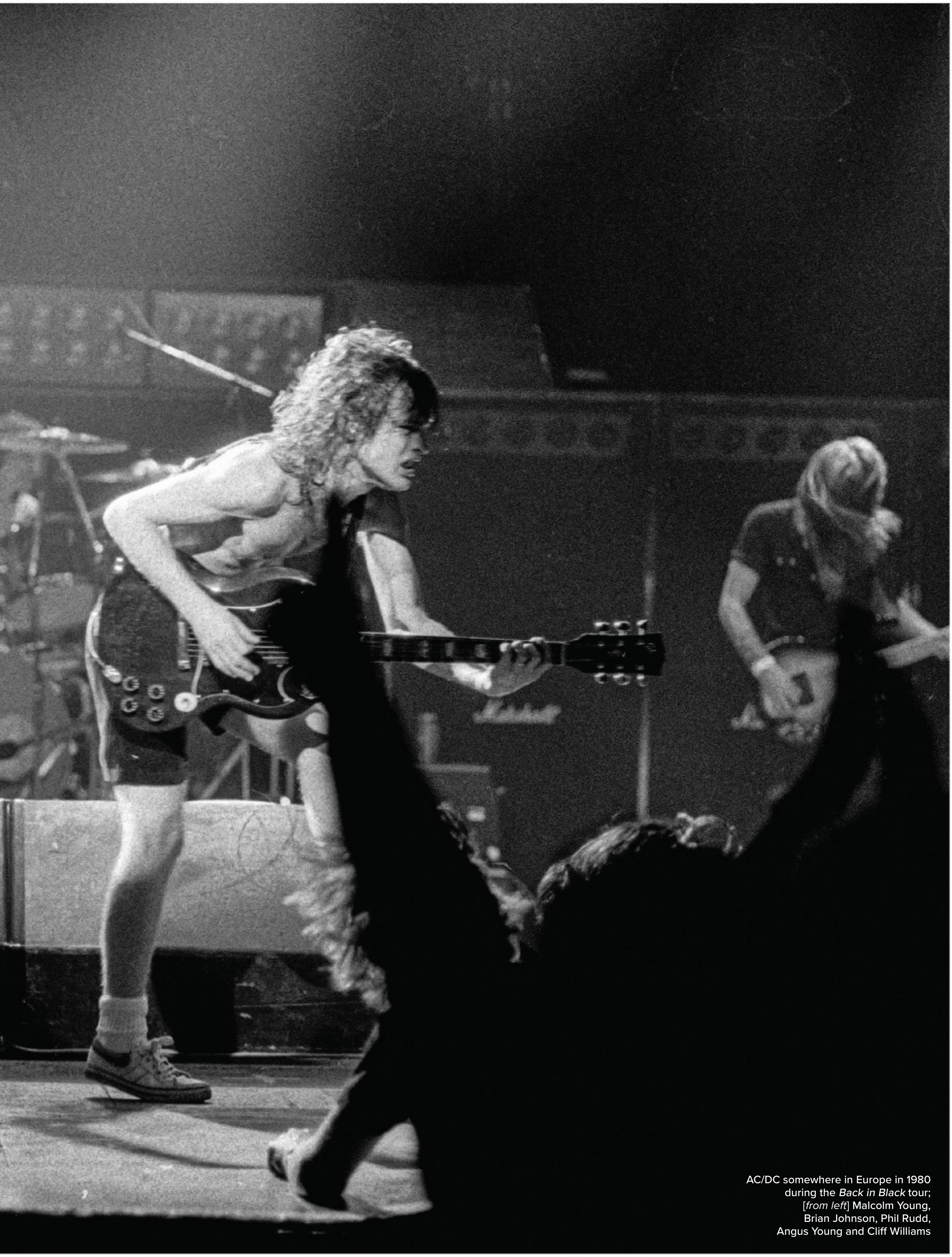
Johnson had big shoes to fill. The man he'd replaced, Bon Scott, had been a great rock 'n' roll singer and charismatic frontman, a free-spirited hellraiser whose easy charm earned him the epithet "Bon the Likeable." Following Bon's death in February that year, the band had pushed on with Johnson to make the album *Back in Black*, of which Angus later said, "When I first heard it in all its glory, I thought: 'Fuck, it's magic!'"

But on that warm summer evening in Namur, with the release of the album still a few weeks away, Johnson was a worried man as he waited for showtime, wondering how AC/DC fans would react to him, especially when he was singing the old songs, Bon's words. It was only when he got on stage and looked out into the audience that he realized how much those fans were rooting for him. In the audience he saw a banner raised aloft, on which it was written, "R.I.P. Bon Scott. Good Luck Brian." "That," he recalled, "just lifted me."

There were moments during the show when all of that anxiety and adrenalin got the better of him. "It was a very traumatic night," he said. "I was so nervous." Halfway into the set, he had a brain-freeze and sang the same lyrics to two songs. "I thought, 'Oh God, what have I done?'" For that he received a bollocking from rhythm guitarist Malcolm Young, Angus' elder brother. "Malcolm looked at me and went: 'What the fuck was that?'"

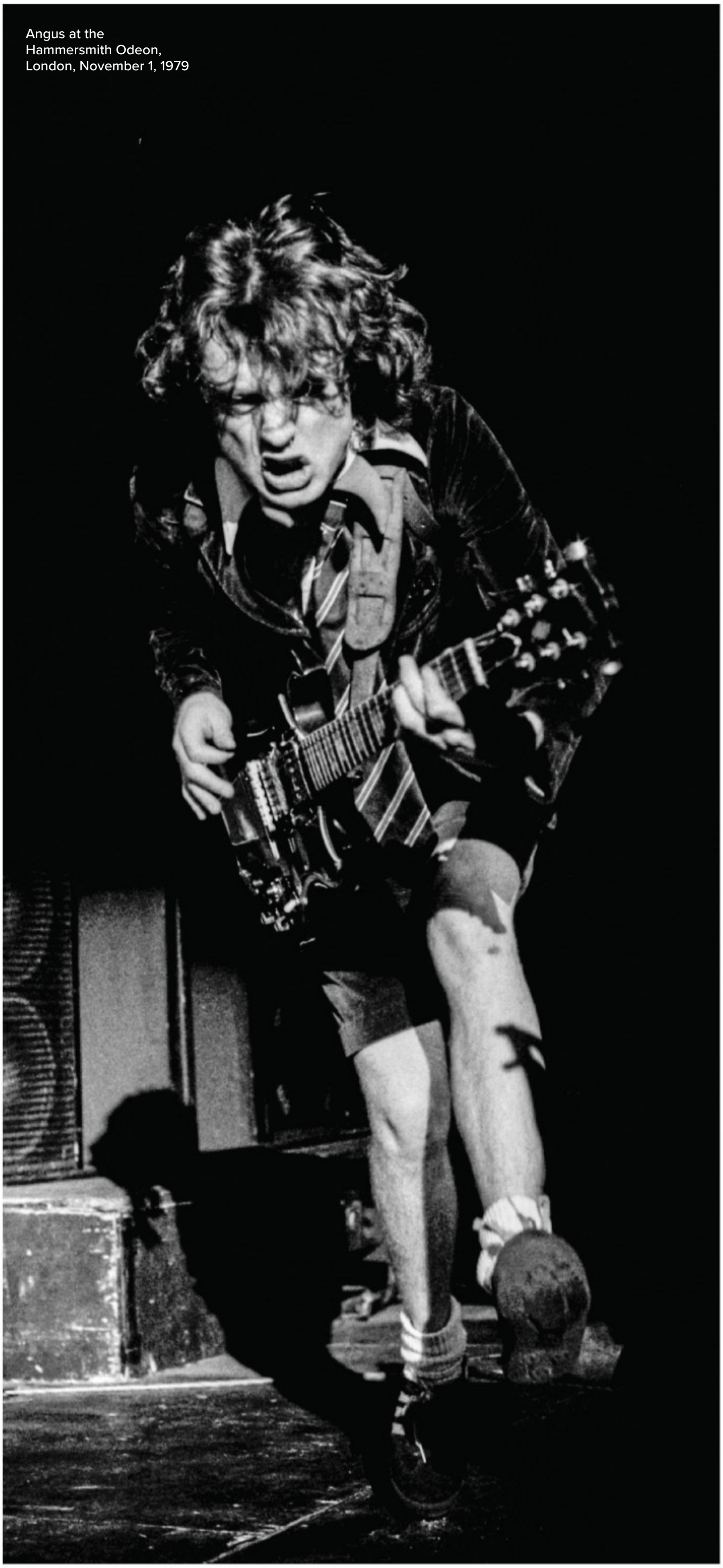
It was a baptism of fire, but Johnson got through it. He won the respect of that audience by singing his balls off and by being his own man. The flat cap he wore was a sign of his working-class roots in the North East of England, and his on-stage demeanour was different to Bon's; Johnson was a cajoling, fist-shaking rabble-rouser, but without the macho swagger that Scott had, or the glint of craziness that was always in his eyes.





AC/DC somewhere in Europe in 1980 during the *Back in Black* tour; [*from left*] Malcolm Young, Brian Johnson, Phil Rudd, Angus Young and Cliff Williams

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES



Angus at the Hammersmith Odeon, London, November 1, 1979

DAVID CORIO/GETTY IMAGES

Johnson also knew from the start how the band worked on stage, ceding the centre ground for Angus to run amok.

That night, AC/DC performed seven songs from *Back in Black*, beginning with album opener "Hells Bells." The set ended with "Let There Be Rock" — significantly, the last song Bon ever sang on stage, just five months earlier, at Southampton Gaumont on January 27, 1980.

Johnson later said of the Namur show, "We had enough spirit to cover up any mistakes." On a deeper level, there was also a feeling within the band that they had a spirit watching over them. As Angus said in the first days after their new singer had joined them: "We still think Bon's around."

ϟ

BON SCOTT HAD known, in his last days, that AC/DC were on to something big. Their 1979 album, *Highway to Hell*, was the band's first million-seller, and in the early days of January 1980, when work began on new songs in London, he was buzzing. These new songs were demoed by Angus and Malcolm, with Bon playing drums, as he had done in his first groups back in Australia, and he was convinced that they had the makings of an album that would be even bigger than *Highway to Hell*. In a phone call to his mother Isa in Australia, he had told her, "This one is going to be it!"

It was only a few days after that call — on February 19, 1980 — that Bon was found dead in East Dulwich, London. He had been out drinking with friends the previous night. Rumors suggested that he might also have taken heroin. In the official inquest, the coroner's report cited "death by misadventure." Bon was just 33.

It was at Bon's funeral, in his home town of Fremantle in western Australia, that his father Chick urged Malcolm and Angus to carry on with the band. On April 1, Johnson, then 32, formerly of glam rock band Geordie, was announced as AC/DC's new singer.

The place where the band created their comeback album was far removed from the cold and gray of London and the bad vibes around Bon's death. Nassau, on the island of New Providence in the Bahamas, was a tropical paradise. As Johnson would tell *Record Mirror*, "Actually it's quite difficult recording in the Bahamas. All you want to do is lounge on the beach. And you can't get a decent pint of beer." He added, with tongue in cheek, "Somehow we managed."

What drew the band to Nassau was the calibre of Compass Point Studios, a world-class facility that had been established by the founder of Island Records, Chris Blackwell.

AC/DC in 1977, during the Bon Scott era; (*from left*), Phil Rudd, Angus Young, Mark Evans, Malcolm Young and Bon Scott

According to Tony Platt, the engineer working on the album alongside producer Robert “Mutt” Lange, it was also beneficial for the band to be in such a remote location, away from all the distractions of London or Sydney. “That helped to bring everyone together,” Platt said.

In the tracks laid down in Nassau, there was something different from previous AC/DC albums, and not only because they had a new singer. While the music was anything but subtle, the change in it was. While the essence of AC/DC — the hard riffing, the heavy grooves — remained intact, the tone had shifted a little. It was rock ’n’ roll, but with more of a heavy metal edge. And what Mutt Lange had begun with the band on *Highway to Hell* — adding a touch of sheen, while retaining maximum power — was brought into full effect. The sound was huge, and at the highest end of it was Johnson’s voice, pushed to its limit.

Some of those tracks were as simple as they come: shoot-from-the-hip numbers such as “Have a Drink on Me,” “What Do You Do for Money Honey,” “Given the Dog a Bone” and the frantic “Shake a Leg.”

Elsewhere, a little more sophistication came into play: the title track, with its ticking-time-bomb intro and twisting riffs, the slow-burning “Let Me Put My Love Into You,” and “Shoot to Thrill” with its funky breakdown. “You Shook Me All Night Long” was a rock ’n’ roll song made for radio, with its ringing intro, hooky riff, walloping groove and shout-it-out-loud chorus. And in “Hells Bells” there was an epic feel, a sense of gravitas AC/DC had never had before, with its tolling bell leading into a slow, mighty riff that was described as “ominous” by Malcolm and “mystical” by Angus.

AC/DC
BACK IN BLACK

As Angus confirmed in a 1991 interview, some lyrics written by Bon were used in the new songs. In other songs there were echoes of his spirit and sense of humor. Just as Bon had poked fun at religion in “Let There Be Rock” and “Highway to Hell,” so Brian delivered a Christian-baiting one-liner in “Hells Bells”: “If good’s on the left, then I’m sticking to the right!” In a similar vein, the bluesy boogie “Rock and Roll Ain’t Noise Pollution” — the last track recorded for the album, written on the spot in around 15 minutes — had an intro in which Brian did what he called “this Southern preacher thing,” just talking off the top of his head and hailing with missionary fervor the life-affirming power of rock ’n’ roll.

> “The whole album was our dedication to Bon Scott — that’s why the cover was pure black”
>
> **ANGUS YOUNG**

With the album completed in six weeks, they knew what they had was dynamite. Atlantic Records knew it, too. The only problem, as the label saw it, was the band’s idea for the album cover — all black, with the AC/DC logo and album title the only detail. It was suggested by Atlantic that this would not be good for business. But the band would not yield. As Angus put it: “The whole *Back in Black* album was our dedication to Bon. That’s why the album cover was pure black, and why the album starts with a bell ringing, something sombre and different to anything else we’d done.”

* * *

IN THE FIRST days of the *Back in Black* tour, with Namur the first of six low-key warm-up gigs in Belgium and Holland, there was another memorable moment for Johnson. He met a Dutch fan with a tattoo of Bon Scott on his arm. “Bon was my hero,”

HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

the fan said. "But now [*that*] he's gone, I wish you all the luck in the world." Johnson later recalled the profound effect those words had on him. "I just stood there shaking," he said.

The band were in Canada, in the first week of a North American tour, when *Back in Black* was released there on July 25, 1980. For one British writer who reviewed the album, there were mixed emotions. Phil Sutcliffe had been a supporter of AC/DC since 1976, and had a great affection for the guys in the band, Bon in particular. In his review for *Sounds*, Sutcliffe awarded *Back in Black* four out of five stars, but stated in memory of Bon: "The ecstasy with which I expect to greet a new AC/DC album just wasn't possible this time." Moreover, he dismissed Brian Johnson as a "copy" of Bon. For all that, Sutcliffe concluded: "*Back in Black* remains a genuine, excellent AC/DC album."

Two other leading critics had no such reservations. *Rolling Stone*'s David Fricke declared the album a masterpiece and a milestone in rock. "*Back in Black* is not only the best of AC/DC's six American albums," he wrote. "It's the apex of heavy metal art: the first LP since *Led Zeppelin II* that captures all the blood, sweat and arrogance of the genre. In other words, *Back in Black* kicks like a mutha." In *Record Mirror*'s review — headlined: 'POWER IS RESTORED' — Robin Smith wrote: "The resurrection shuffle starts here. Brian was the perfect choice, possessing an almost uncanny feel for the band's songs."

In Smith's feature on AC/DC in the July 26 edition of *Record Mirror*, Johnson said: "Bon is still around and watching. At night in my hotel room I had proof that he was there in some form. I know that he approves of what the new lineup is trying to do. He didn't want the band to split up or to go into a long period of mourning. He wanted us to build on the spirit he left behind."

In that interview, Johnson opened up to a remarkable degree, expressing his sorrow over Bon's death. "It's strange how rock music breeds ecstasy and tragedy," he said. "You build up that great feeling every night when you go on stage, and then suddenly death strikes in the strangest form. The truth of the matter was that Bon died because he vomited when his neck was twisted, and he choked. That poor boy was loved by thousands of people worldwide." He also spoke with great humility about his role in the band. "I hope I've been accepted by AC/DC fans," he said. "They want the band to go on as well. Certainly I've had no letters or phone calls saying 'get out.'"

On August 1, at the Palladium in New York City, AC/DC's support act, for one night only,

FUN FACT!

The Beastie Boys sampled "Back in Black" for their 1984 song "Rock Hard." They sought AC/DC's permission after the fact, but permission was denied, based on AC/DC's anti-sampling policy.

How the "Bells" Tolled

A quick guide to Angus Young's *Back in Black*-era gear, as heard on "Hells Bells"

IT'S WELL-DOCUMENTED that Angus Young is a no-nonsense player who prefers the sound of just a guitar and amp with no other effects. But there's much more to Angus' tone than just his timeless Gibson SG Standard and Marshall amp rig. In the studio — particularly when recording *Back in Black* — Young used a variety of different Marshall amp heads to narrow down the perfect individual guitar tones for each song. Some of his favorite recording amps for *Back in Black* included various plexi Super Lead 100-watt heads when he needed crisp treble and crunchy overdrive, various 50-watt Marshalls for solos and Marshall 2203 JMP 100-watt master volume heads for when he wanted darker tones with fatter midrange and more saturated distortion.

Unfortunately, Angus didn't keep detailed records of what amps he used on which *Back in Black* songs, but his tone on "Hells Bells" has the unmistakable midrange growl and thick saturated grit of a Marshall 2203. Angus recorded his primary rhythm track (panned hard right) using just his favorite 1970 Gibson SG Standard and a Marshall 2203 half stack (the amp can be heard bleeding into the mics used to record Malcolm's amp, which is panned to the left channel), but when recording overdubs for his center-channel rhythm guitar track and solo he also employed his secret weapon — a Schaffer-Vega Diversity System wireless transmitter and receiver.

ATL 11 650 N
AC/DC
Hells Bells
What Do You Do For Money Honey

Angus used the Schaffer partly because it allowed him to play in the control room and hear his performance over the monitors. More importantly, the Schaffer system's circuitry provides more than 30dB of clean boost along with compression and expansion (a.k.a. companding) to deliver richer harmonic content, more dynamic touch sensitivity and fuller body while maintaining percussive attack and the raw metallic crunch of the strings. The Schaffer essentially took what was good about Angus' Marshall tones and made them great, which explains why many guitarists who plug into SG and Marshall rigs in search of his sound fail to truly replicate his elusive magic.

If you're looking to bring some of that Schaffer-Vega magic into your life, check out the SoloDallas Storm pedal. It's an exact replica of the Schaffer-Vega's boost and companding circuitry; nothing gets you closer to Angus' signature tones from AC/DC's classic recordings. For more SoloDallas fun, check out our review of the company's SVDS Boost pedal in the June 2025 issue of *GW*. — ***Chris Gill***

STORM
GAIN
BOOST
LIMITER
THE SCHAFFER REPLICA
SOLODALLAS

VINYLS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, SOLODALLAS

Angus Young's original gear

GUITAR: 1970 Gibson SG Standard with stock Gibson "T-Top" humbucking pickups (bridge pickup setting), Volume: 10, Tone: 10

AMP: Late-Seventies Marshall 2203 JMP 100-watt head (Presence: 0, Bass: 5, Middle: 6, Treble: 5, Master Volume: 5, Preamp Volume: 6, High Sensitivity input), Marshall 4x12 cabinet loaded with Celestion G12M greenback speakers

EFFECTS: Schaffer-Vega Diversity Wireless

STRINGS/TUNING: Gibson Ultra Lights — .009, .011, .016, .024, .032, .042/Standard

PICK: Fender Extra Heavy

Angus does his thing at the Rosemont Horizon in Chicago, September 20, 1980

PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

was Def Leppard, whose singer Joe Elliott was celebrating his 21st birthday. The young British band, then promoting their debut album, *On Through the Night*, had opened for AC/DC a year earlier on the *Highway to Hell* tour. They also shared a manager with AC/DC, Peter Mensch, and as a result they had been among the first people, outside of AC/DC's inner circle, to hear *Back in Black*. Joe Elliott recalled in 2020: "Mensch came on our tour bus with a cassette of the album, and when we heard 'Hells Bells' we all sat there going, 'Holy crap!' It was almost *too* fucking good."

When Elliott met Johnson for the first time, in a hotel lobby ahead of the New York show, the conversation they had seemed a little weird to Joe.

"Brian was a seasoned veteran," he said. "Geordie had a few hits in the early Seventies, and after that he'd done years in clubs in the North East. But this was one of his first gigs in the States, and I'd already done a ton of gigs out there. So he took me to one side and said, 'What the hell am I supposed to do?' I was just a kid, still learning my craft, but I told him, 'Just be yourself, man. It's all you can do.'"

That night, when Elliott watched AC/DC's performance from the side of the stage, he still had his doubts as to whether Johnson could pull this off. "What they had with Bon Scott was this cocky motherfucker, bare chest, all attitude. And then you've got the guy who looks like fucking Andy Capp singing for them! My initial impression was, 'Hmm, not sure about this. But as it turned out, Brian was perfect for that band, and maybe the only guy who could have done it. He had the voice for it. And that record — it was just amazing."

Back in Black was an immediate hit. Within two weeks of its release, it was at Number 1 in the U.K. The first single from it, "You Shook Me All Night Long," made the Top 40 in the U.K. and U.S. and the Top 10 in Australia. By early October, when the band finished touring in North America, the album was certified platinum in the U.S. as it began an incredible 13-month residency in the *Billboard* Top 10.

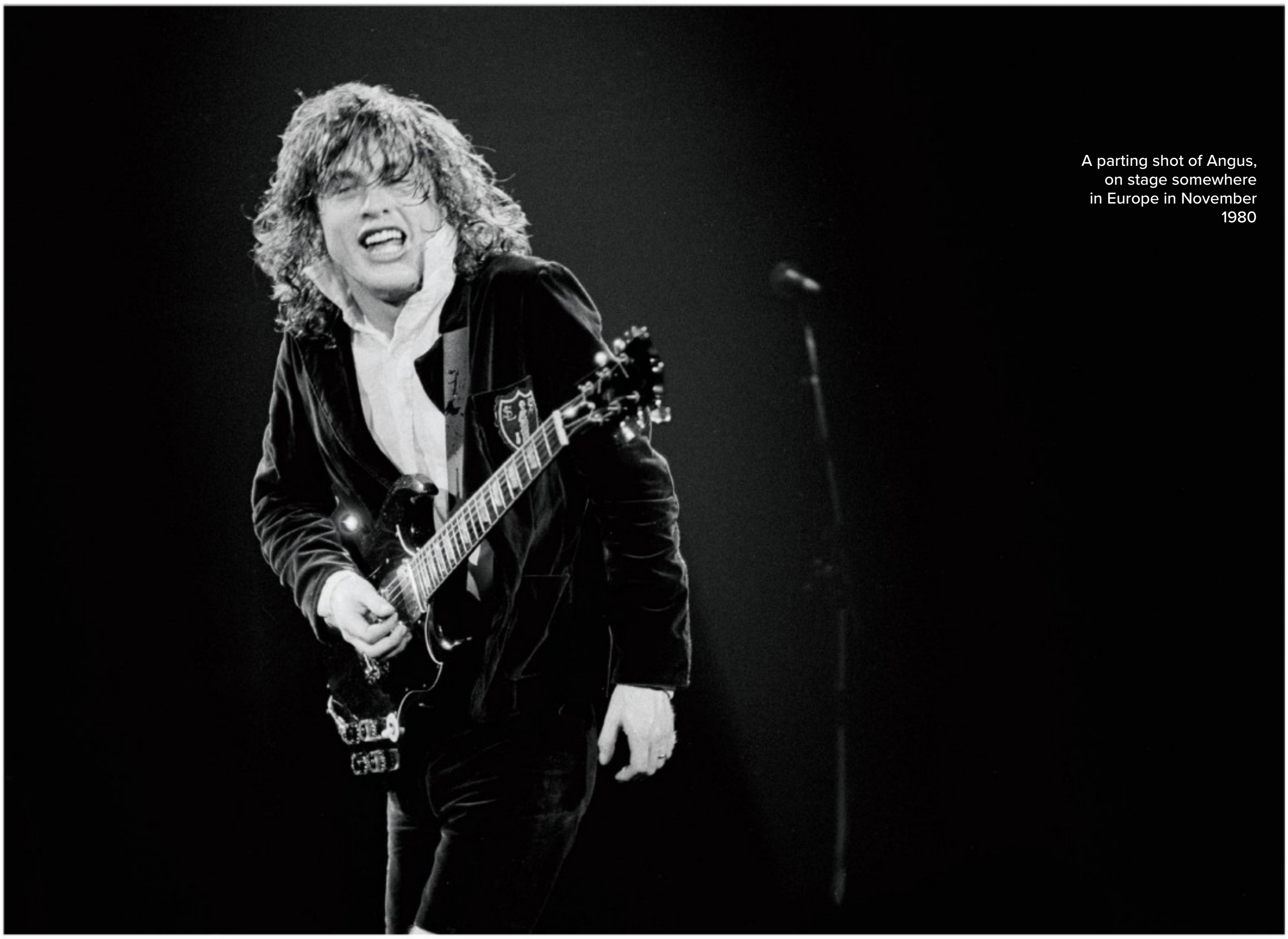
It had been a punishing schedule in North America — 64 shows in three months — and there was no let-up.

On October 19, just eight days after the final U.S. date, the band's U.K. tour kicked off at the Colston Hall in Bristol. Such was the demand for AC/DC that this tour included six sold-out shows in London: three at Hammersmith Odeon and three at the Apollo Victoria Theatre. At this time, the single "Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution" gave AC/DC their biggest U.K. hit to date, reaching Number 15. And in America it was reported that the album was selling 10 thousand copies a day.

It was on December 4, when AC/DC played in Essen, Germany, that the demise of the biggest rock band in the world was confirmed. The death of Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham on September 25, 1980, had come seven months after that of Bon Scott, and in similar circumstances. Bonham was a heavy drinker and died in his sleep at the home of Jimmy Page following rehearsals for a U.S. tour. The official inquest revealed that Bonham had vomited and choked to death after consuming approximately 40 shots of alcohol within 24 hours. At the age of 32, Bonham was a year younger than Bon had been. For Zeppelin there was no way back. A band statement read: "We wish it to be known that the loss of our dear friend, and the deep sense of undivided harmony felt by ourselves and our manager, have led us to decide that we could not continue as we were."

> "When we heard 'Hells Bells' we all said, 'Holy crap!' It was almost *too* good"
> **JOE ELLIOTT**

In contrast, AC/DC had overcome the death of Bon Scott to become bigger than ever. And after the last European dates, and four more in Japan in early February, came the last and most significant shows of the



A parting shot of Angus, on stage somewhere in Europe in November 1980

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Back in Black tour, as AC/DC returned to the place where it all began.

The band arrived in Australia to lurid headlines in the newspapers. What Johnson had said earlier in the year — how he had felt Bon was watching over him — was translated into classic tabloid sensational-ism. As Malcolm said in 2003, "When we went back to Australia with Brian the first time, the headline in the paper was: 'Brian Speaks to Bon!' They were just looking for a big sell on the front page. He had a hell of a time living it down." Even so, for the band this was a familiar story. As Angus said: "When Brian first joined us, there were lots of guys turning up saying they'd contacted Bon on ouija boards."

In an emotional and triumphant home-coming, AC/DC performed seven shows in Australia, and at the third date in Sydney on February 23 there was a moment that Brian Johnson would remember for the rest of his life. Bon's mother Isa was a guest at the show, and afterwards she said to Brian: "Our Bon would have been proud of you, son." For Brian, there could be no greater validation.

The tour ended with two shows at the Sidney Meyer Music Bowl in Melbourne on February 27 and 28. The last of those shows came a year and one day since the last gig with Bon. By this time, *Back in Black* had sold more than three million copies in the U.S. alone.

THE RESURRECTION OF AC/DC with *Back in Black* was arguably the greatest comeback in the entire history of rock 'n' roll. Out of their darkest hour had come a heroic victory.

Guns N' Roses guitarist Slash was just 15 when *Back in Black* was released. Many years later, he recalled the impact that record had on him, and spoke of it as a triumph not just for Brian Johnson and AC/DC, but also for rock music, period.

"*Back in Black* saved rock 'n' roll," Slash said. "It was the defining rock record of that time, and it just exploded! AC/DC was always a great band, totally genuine. But the miracle of the whole thing was that *Back in Black* was just a great new record, it was still AC/DC. We all missed Bon, but we let him go and at the same time welcomed and embraced Brian."

> **"Back in Black saved rock 'n' roll. It was the defining record of that time; it just exploded!"**
> **SLASH**

The key songs from *Back in Black* — the title song (which Jerry Cantrell once called "the ultimate rock song"), "Hells Bells," "Shoot to Thrill" and "You Shook Me All Night Long" — have remained in AC/DC's live set for decades. Most remarkable of all is the sheer scale of this album's success. *Back in Black* is not only the biggest-selling rock album there has ever been — bigger than anything by Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, the Rolling Stones or even the Beatles — with more than 50 million copies sold it's also the second-biggest-selling album of all time, after Michael Jackson's *Thriller*.

In the making of *Back in Black*, their tribute to Bon, as Angus Young called it, AC/DC dug deep. As Malcolm Young once said, "The emotion in that album, it will be around forever."

For Joe Elliott, and millions of others who feel the same way, what AC/DC achieved on *Back in Black* was perfection. "That record sounds as good now as it did the day it was released," Elliott said. "It's timeless, and very few records are like that — the first Montrose album, the first Van Halen album, the first Boston album. AC/DC was always about full-on rock 'n' roll, based on the blues and Chuck Berry. But with *Back in Black* they blew everybody else out of the water. It's one of the greatest rock albums ever made."

ESSENCE
SERIES

SEE US AT THE MELBOURNE GUITAR SHOW

The Essence Series offers a pure acoustic guitar experience. By focusing on core elements, we've crafted a guitar that delivers exceptional sound and playability at an affordable price. The solid torrefied Sitka spruce top produces a rich, warm tone, perfectly balanced by mahogany back and sides. The intricate herringbone rosette and purfling add visual appeal, while the Fishman preamp system ensures your sound remains clear and vibrant, even on stage.

Body Shape	Grand Auditorium / OM Cutaway
Scale	25.5"(648mm)
Top	Torrefied Solid Sitka Spruce with Torrefied Spruce Bracing
Back&Sides	Mahogany
Neck	Mahogany
Fingerboard	Rosewood
Bridge	Rosewood
Nut& Saddle	Genuine Bone
Nut Width	13/4"(45mm) - Grand Auditorium 111/16"(43mm) - OM Cutaway
Machineheads	Vintage open gear (18:1 Ratio)
Electronics	Fishman® Presys VT s-core Pickup
Special	Herringbone Rosette & Purfling
String	Elixir® Phosphor Bronze Nanoweb Light 012-053
Colour	Natural Semi Gloss (NSG) Black Top Semi Gloss (BTSG)

Proudly distributed by Dynamic Music | www.dynamicmusic.com.au | +61 2 9939 1299

@cortaustralia Cort Australia

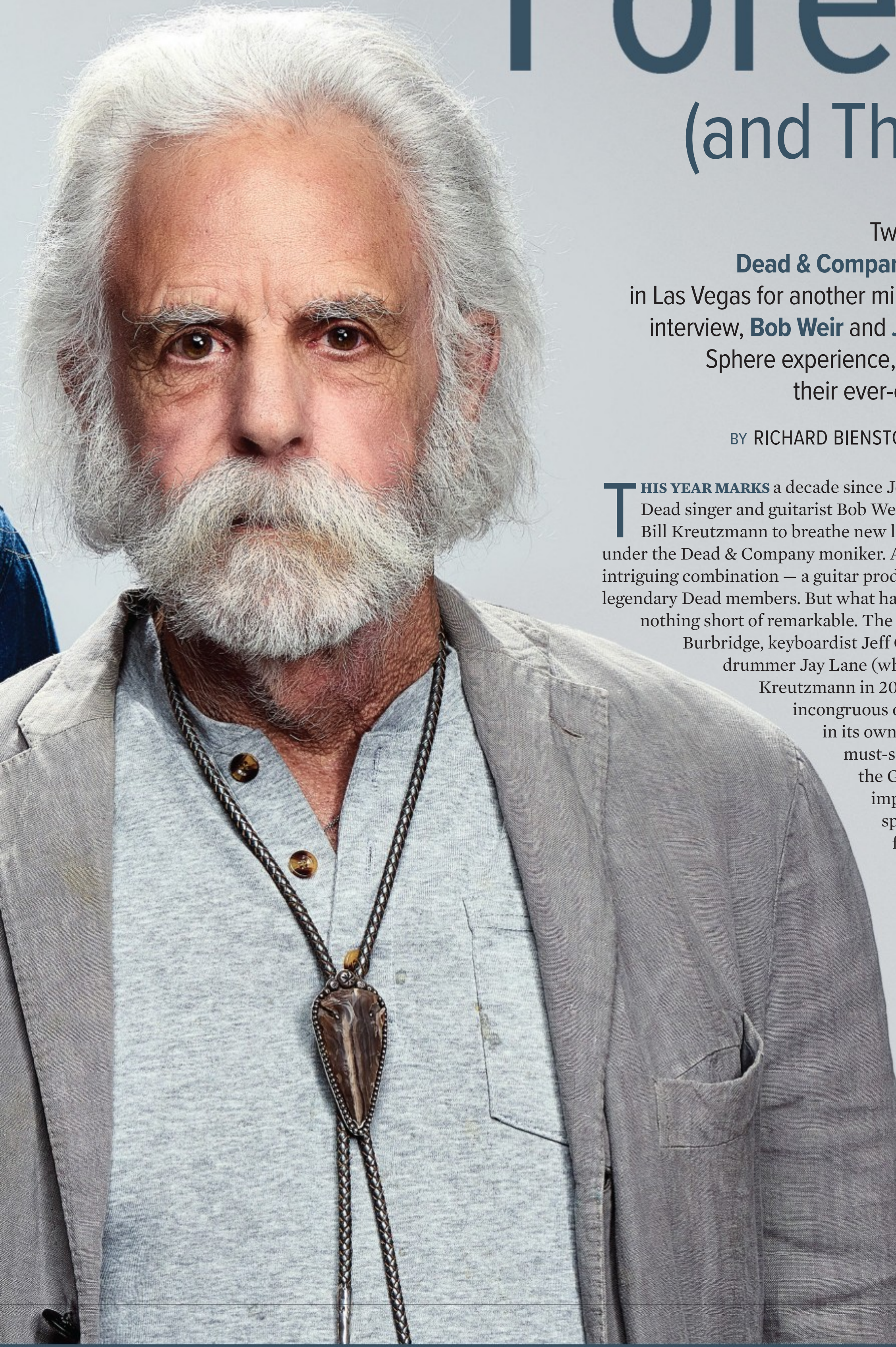
Dead & Company's John Mayer [*left*] and Bob Weir photographed in Hollywood, January 28, 2025

Dead Forever

(and Then Some)

Two years after their Final Tour, **Dead & Company** are rolling back to Sphere in Las Vegas for another mind-blowing residency. In this interview, **Bob Weir** and **John Mayer** break down the Sphere experience, latest gear adjustments and their ever-evolving musical partnership

BY RICHARD BIENSTOCK PORTRAITS BY JEN ROSENSTEIN



JEN ROSENSTEIN

THIS YEAR MARKS a decade since John Mayer teamed up with Grateful Dead singer and guitarist Bob Weir and drummers Mickey Hart and Bill Kreutzmann to breathe new life into the band's iconic catalog under the Dead & Company moniker. At the time, it felt like a curious, if intriguing combination — a guitar prodigy with pop chops pairing with the legendary Dead members. But what has unfolded over the past 10 years is nothing short of remarkable. The band, rounded out by bassist Oteil Burbridge, keyboardist Jeff Chimenti and, more recently, drummer Jay Lane (who stepped in full time for Kreutzmann in 2023), has transcended its incongruous origins and become a genuine force in its own right, establishing itself as a must-see stadium draw — one that's kept the Grateful Dead's exploratory, improvisatory and highly musical spirit alive while forging a path forward with an energy all its own.

In 2023, Dead & Company embarked on what was billed as the "Final Tour," capping a years-long run that saw the group play to an estimated four million-plus fans since those first 2015 shows. But while it seemed like the '23 outing was it for this other one, Dead & Company soon set out to explore a new frontier: a residency at Sphere, the cutting-edge Las Vegas venue known for its state-of-the-art technology. Among its many innovations is a massive 160,000-square-foot LED

➜

screen that encircles both the audience and the band, along with an unparalleled sound system — the largest concert-grade audio setup in the world — featuring spatial audio, haptic technology and more than 167,000 individual speaker drivers. At first glance, this ultra-modern setting might seem a mismatch for a legacy band with deep roots in traditional music. But it's actually a perfect pairing. "We were doing liquid projections on screens and stuff like that, where the visuals could move in time with the music, back in the 'Acid Test' days," Weir points out. Those days, it's worth noting, were more than a half-century ago.

The Sphere residency, titled "Dead Forever," spanned 30 shows from May to August in 2024. Mayer was the driving creative force behind the production, and the singer and guitarist skillfully balanced tradition and innovation, staying true to the band's roots while embracing the futuristic nature of Sphere's immersive visuals and sonics. As he puts it, the goal was to find a sweet spot "between 'Monster Mash' and 2001: A Space Odyssey." It's a fine line, but one he and the band navigated expertly. Sphere's technology allowed Dead & Company to create breathtaking, dynamic visuals that amplified their performances, but Mayer and the band ensured the feeling stayed grounded — warm, human and connected to the core of their music.

Dead & Company's run at Sphere was an incredible success, and it's possible that of the handful of bands who have appeared there, they may have been the most effective at weaving the venue's unique features into the fabric of their performance. So it wasn't surprising that they decided to return. In March of this year, the band launched a second Dead Forever residency, scheduled to run until May. This time, they're coming in as Sphere veterans. "So we've already learned what we can get away with and what we can't get away with," Weir says.

For Mayer, it's an opportunity to further the blend of "heritage and futurism" they explored last year. Sphere, he says, "really wants to be futuristic, so it's cool to also pull the storytelling back into something really human. This run has even more beautiful, situational places to hang out under the Sphere; there's a lot more feeling like you're somewhere organic and warm. It's an opportunity to make more worlds out of the ones we liked a lot and really fell in love with during the shows last year, where you go, 'Ahh, here it is...' "

Ultimately, the Sphere shows are a natural extension of what Dead & Company is all about. "With this band, we're able to open a portal," Mayer says. "And if it's not a portal to go back in time, it's a portal to enter those feelings that you didn't think you could go back and feel again." Those feelings, much like the music, clearly still strike a deep chord with fans.

Prior to the kickoff of the current residency, Mayer and Weir sat down to discuss a range of topics, including adjusting to the audio and visual demands of the Sphere experience, their guitar playing and gear, and how their musical partnership has evolved over the past decade together. They also touched on the possibility of, for the first time, bringing Dead & Company's music from the stage to the studio. Two years after the Final Tour, it's clear that the phrase "Dead Forever" continues to ring true.

> "The Sphere becomes like this big elephant at the circus that we work with"
> JOHN MAYER

A scene from Dead & Company's latest residency at Sphere, June 15, 2024

CHLOE WEIR

You're back for Round 2 at Sphere. I can imagine that building and pulling off the shows last year was a massive undertaking. Did any lessons or insights from that experience shape how you approached this one?

JOHN MAYER: I suppose one thing I learned was that in terms of sensory experience, the audience can handle more. The first time through, I was being very careful about not disorienting anybody with what the Sphere does or can do. But I think I learned that having your senses pushed a little further, but not to the breaking point, the audience can handle it — and wants a little more of it. In terms of motion [of the visuals], you do have to keep it under a certain threshold. But as far as what kind of motion, I feel like people want a little bit of a thrill ride. So we'll push that just a little bit more this time.

The concert experience at Sphere is often looked at from the fan's perspective, but I'm curious — what's it like for you onstage, especially in comparison to a regular Dead & Company show?

BOB WEIR: As far as the experience of playing, I expect it is different, but I can't really quantify or qualify how it's different. We still have our sight lines. John and I still look at each other, we still take each other's facial expressions into consideration when we're playing something, all that stuff. For what it's worth, I can't see what everybody else is seeing of John, which is, you know, his head 30-feet wide on the screen behind me. [Laughs] That particular camera angle, that's not how I'm seeing him. But that would be great if I could watch him like that, if I could see what everybody else is seeing...

Is there anything unique about how you interact with the audience, or with the visuals?

MAYER: The first show, I remember we played "Mississippi Half-Step" and the crowd was roaring. The energy really hyped us up — so much so that I think we kind of had a hard time putting the song where we wanted to put the song. But over the next two shows we began to learn that the Sphere is our friend. It's our colleague. We know the crowd's going to ooh and aah, so we don't have to — we can continue to keep our energy where we want it. Then the Sphere becomes kind of like this big elephant at the circus that we work with. I think that's a pretty fair metaphor. It's this massive thing you have to respect, but it's a part of our show. You almost want to pat the side of the Sphere and go, "Good girl, good girl."

So it took us about one weekend to learn how to keep our breathing slow, keep our tempo right, even though we know that what's happening out there is incredibly dynamic. We had to learn to separate the musical dynamic from the visual dynamic. But when we figured that out, then things got sensational, because we could continue to make the music at our own tempo, in our own dynamic, knowing that it was merging with what was happening out there.

Did you have a favorite moment in the show during the first run?

MAYER: There are only a couple of times where I will let myself be a part of the experience the fans are having. One particular part that I was just so mesmerized by was when we return back to Earth [toward the end of the show], and we move through this particle field. I look up and feel it come over my head, and I take that time every night to be swept away by it. It's like, for one moment I get high on my own supply. [Laughs] And then I go back to the thing.

How about you, Bob? Are there times when you find yourself getting caught up in the visuals?

WEIR: Yes… but really, when I walk onstage, I walk into a hallucinogenic realm. I'm gone. I'm as out-there as a fellow gets, and I'm not sure I'm even going to notice the tech. We do have to watch the visuals at the beginning and the end of the show, because we have to time everything. But the visuals probably hit anybody else in that place harder than they do the people onstage, because the average guy onstage is in a hallucinogenic realm to begin with. That's the nature of our business.

What has been your experience from an audio perspective?

➔

"Basically 90 percent of the show is handled by the Dead Spec [*PRS Silver Sky*]," Mayer says

"My D'Angelico, it's rich, too," Weir says. "The pickups get good high end, and it's pretty versatile"

WEIR: Well, the sound is real good in there. But I did have to make my peace with in-ears. We have to use them, because the Sphere is basically the world's largest hard, parabolic, reflective surface, and it's all pointed directly back at you. And with that comes a report that's somewhere in the neighborhood of a third of a second that's every bit as loud as anything that happens onstage. And it's almost always out of time with the song you're playing. So there's various things you can do. Overhead microphones, for instance, will hear nothing but slapback. And if you have them in your [onstage] mix, if you're listening to the drums, for instance, you're getting at least half slapback. And that's not what you want to hear, because that slapback is almost always out of time with the song. So we went to electronic cymbals, and we didn't have to deal with overhead microphones. And we went to in-ears.

Other guitarists who've performed at Sphere, like the Edge and Phish's Trey Anastasio, have noted that the venue's unique design makes it challenging, and also somewhat unnecessary, to use traditional amps onstage. The Edge, in particular, mentioned switching from tube amps to Universal Audio amp sim pedals for his setup.

WEIR: Well, you know, at first I had all this stuff with me — an iso chamber with a guitar amp in it, all of that. But very quickly, I was done with it. It was just not necessary. Instead, I've been using the Universal Audio Ruby, which is basically a [Vox] AC30 in a stompbox. I couldn't have imagined when I first walked in there that that was going to be pretty much all I'd need. It turns out it was pretty much all I needed. [Laughs]

Was that a big change from, say, your rig on Dead & Company's 2023 stadium tour?

WEIR: Actually, on that tour I was using the UA Ruby pretty predominantly, too. In fact, I might have been using it pretty much exclusively. Now, I use a little bit of signal processing, but not much. With the amount of high-end that I use on that Ruby, I find that signal processing in general is not a good idea, because I can articulate all the information from the string better if I just let the string speak. Other than that, I used compression — I have UA's 1176 [Studio Compressor pedal], a tiny bit of reverb, and that's pretty much it.

➔

Pigpen [*left*] and Jerry Garcia in action at Santa Clara County Fairgrounds in San Jose, May 18, 1968

The Grateful Dead by Jim Marshall

A new book of photos by the iconic photographer captures his unique relationship with San Francisco's favorite jam band **BY BILL DeMAIN**

PHOTOGRAPHER AMELIA DAVIS is the former assistant to the legendary Jim Marshall, best-known for capturing shots of Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash and many others. In the late Sixties, Marshall lived in San Francisco, where he was part of the creative family around the Grateful Dead. To celebrate the band's 60th anniversary, Davis and band historian David Gans have curated a lavishly illustrated coffee-table book — *The Grateful Dead by Jim Marshall: Photos and Stories from the Formative Years, 1966-1977* — which is out this summer via Chronicle Books. Below, Davis breaks down Marshall's relationship with the band — and what makes his photos so indispensable.

Jim Marshall shot more than 10,000 photos of the Dead. How did you choose which to include in the book?

We chose a mix of iconic images that everybody's seen, along with other photos that people haven't. We wanted to show the Grateful Dead as individuals, in their surroundings. Also, we wanted to include a lot of color. Jim is known for his black-and-white photos, but that Kodachrome slide film is so vibrant. We hope that all these photos together give an intimate sense of who they were and what they were surrounded by.

How did Jim become part of the Grateful Dead's inner circle?

In 1965, he was well-established as a photographer. They'd seen his album covers and his photos in different magazines. So they had a lot of respect for Jim. They knew that if he took their photographs, they'd be getting top-quality shots. Over time, he befriended them and became part of the family. They knew he'd never betray their trust. That trust was such an important part of how Jim built relationships with artists. You look at some of these shots, and Jim's right there, really close to Jerry [*Garcia*] and Pigpen [*Ron McKernan*] and Bob [*Weir*]. But you'd never know he was there!

What else comes through for you in these photos?

Diversity, integration. Haight-Ashbury was predominantly a Black family neighborhood before the Grateful Dead and the hippies moved in. But they embraced that difference. It was a community of people joining together to listen to music and experiment with culture and acceptance. Also, in the performance shots, I see that they were the inspiration for jam bands. They were improvisational. You get that feeling when you look at the audience and how they're interacting with the musicians. You can almost hear the music in your head when looking at these photos.

> "Over time, he befriended them and became part of the family. They knew he'd never betray their trust"

THE GRATEFUL DEAD BY JIM MARSHALL

Jim seemed well-suited for that improvisational situation.

It was very much capturing the moment as it happened. He had to be ready to improvise with his cameras and what he was seeing. Also, Jim loved music, and you can tell that in these photos. He really was feeling and listening to the music as he was photographing.

What do you hope people get from this book?

I hope they see the humanity in the band, and what was happening in that time period. I also hope they see that photography, when done well, tells its own story. Maybe Jim can inspire a younger generation to push the limits of not just photographing somebody standing in front of a microphone, but telling the story of what else is going on around them.

© JIM MARSHALL PHOTOGRAPHY LLC

John, you actually still had tube amps onstage with you during the first run at Sphere.

MAYER: I grew up playing tube amps. I grew up feeling the combustion. I really like the UA Enigmatic ['82 Overdrive Special Amp] pedal, and I think if you're a young guitar player, that's money well spent. But my style of playing relies on a certain amount of pushback. I need shocks on the tires. And I think that can only come from the ignition inside of a tube.

During last year's residency, you shared a video on your socials that gained a lot of attention, showing your guitar sound coming from speaker cabinets inside a shipping crate on the loading dock of the Sphere, which was mic'd up so that the audience heard it as part of the band performance.

MAYER: This is going to kind of merge into a very hot topic among guitar players — something they like to call "pushing air." The Pushing Air Debate. For me, I know for a fact that I need a larger space for soundwaves to come out of a guitar amp and be caught a little bit further away than an iso box allows. There has to be more of a comet tail so that the note can bloom a little bit. So we had to devise a system that would give a little more space to the speakers. And what we decided to do was use shipping crates as much larger iso boxes — kind of a "mini room." In fact, Jeremy Nielsen, my guitar tech, decorated the inside of the box as if it were a small-scale studio, because that's how much of a genius he is. That gave us some dimension so that while I was playing, there was just that extra little bit of space for the note to grow. So my amps were onstage, but the speakers were in these boxes on the loading dock of the Sphere.

It looked like you had a few Dumble amps onstage, as well as a Fender Twin Reverb.

MAYER: Yeah. I really like the Small Special, and then there was an Overdrive Special and maybe a Dumble-modded Bandmaster, I believe. And the [Fender] Twin. Those are onstage, and the speaker cabinets are in the crates on the loading dock. Which… if you deduce from one more level of reasoning, the cabs onstage, let's just say they're there to help raise the heads of the amps so that I can reach them with my hand. [Laughs] Otherwise they'd be sitting on the ground. But if you walk through the back of the loading dock of the Sphere while the show is happening, you will hear my guitar blaring out of a pile of road cases. That's what Derek [Featherstone, Dead & Company tour director/FOH engineer] is mic'ing up to use in the room.

Bob, your main guitar lately has been a Fender Stratocaster. But back in the Grateful Dead days, you weren't really known as a Strat player. What drew you to the Strat?

WEIR: The one I'm using is a '64. As for what drew me to playing a Strat, I can't really say. Every day your tastes change. And it was just one morning, I sort of woke up and I didn't want to hear the double-coil sound anymore. I'd been playing humbucker guitars for a while, and then I woke up and I wanted to play on a single coil. And you know, single coils, they get interfered with and all that kind of stuff, but they are richer [sounding].

At Sphere you alternated the Strat with a few other guitars — your signature D'Angelico semi-hollowbody, for one, and several Les Pauls, including a goldtop and a Black Beauty.

WEIR: My D'Angelico — it's rich, too. The pickups get good high end, and it's pretty versatile. There's a lot you can do with it, a lot of sounds you can pull out. And I've

Weir in the spotlight during last year's Sphere residency; the venue features a 160,000-square-foot LED screen that encircles the audience and the band

ALIVE COVERAGE (THIS PAGE), CHLOE WEIR (FACING) actually got three old goldtops and a few more black ones. The goldtops, Joe Bonamassa found one, maybe two of them, for me. And then the other one, I was talking to my luthier and he was touting the praises of Gibson's reissue of the Fifties goldtop. And I just said to myself, "Okay, I've gotta see what this is all about." That was my first one. And I was smitten by the goldtop, especially with the P90s in it. So now I have that one and the two older ones.

John, you pulled out several unique guitars during the first Sphere residency, including a Fender Custom Shop replica of Jerry Garcia's famous modded "Alligator" Stratocaster and a white Custom Shop Strat that had previously belonged to Jeff Beck. But you stuck primarily to two trusty PRS models — a McCarty 594 and, mostly, the "Dead Spec" version of your signature Silver Sky.

MAYER: Yes. Basically 90 percent of the show is handled by the Dead Spec, and then there's particular cases for the 594. That guitar, I call it the blowtorch. When I want to do late-Sixties-Fillmore-acid-test Grateful Dead, kind of SG/Les Paul-burning stuff, the 594 is perfect for that. It also has probably the best humbucker neck pickup I've ever played on a guitar. So when I want to do that barrelhouse thing, I pick up that guitar.

The Dead Spec, of course, is a customized take on your signature guitar, drawing inspiration from Jerry's original Alligator. Your model has several modifications, including an Alembic Blaster preamp that boosts the signal with 3-14 dB of gain, along with brass hardware to enhance brightness and resonance. Jerry's tone is not an easy thing to approximate, but I imagine having this guitar helps.

MAYER: There are certain inalienable details in Jerry's playing that are part of the music. It's like if you were going to play Miles Davis music you have to have a mute for your trumpet. You could say that's just a gear thing, but it's part of the vocabulary. So if you're playing Jerry's stuff, you've got to push the front end of the amp a little bit more than you normally would. And then you've got to get a little more accent on the high end so that you can really pick those notes. Because there's so much nuance in what Jerry was doing; he would use dynamics as a way to create motifs, almost like a horn player. So what you have to do is put a certain amount of boost in your signal so that you're giving the amp slightly more in the front end than the makers intended. If you play at, like, a five out of a 10, then the amp is happy. That's where you get that "steel drum" thing. And if you hit it a little hard, you're pushing the amp more than it wants to be pushed. If you can get certain notes to hit the red, that's the magic, man. That's where you can really have a blast.

"Sphere is basically the world's largest hard, parabolic, reflective surface, and it's all pointed directly back at you," Weir says

> "When I walk onstage, I walk into a hallucinogenic realm. I'm not sure I'm even going to notice the tech" BOB WEIR

I assume the Alembic boost helps with that.

MAYER: Yes, but that little trim pot in there, it's pretty low. Lower than you might think. You wouldn't get your money's worth if that was a boost pedal, because it's very, very subtle. But it's just enough to feed the amp a certain amount of level so that it kind of stays on its toes. And another thing is that, of course, Jerry's guitar had so much brass on it. That's why the Dead Spec has a brass nut, a brass retainer bar over the strings. It's trying to get that string to pass over as much brass surface as possible to get that ring out. Because we started to learn that that brassiness in the tone comes from... brass. [Laughs]

In a way, the Dead Spec Silver Sky represents a fusion of your guitar design with Jerry's. There's a similar balance you have to achieve in your playing — respecting Jerry's legacy while still putting your own stamp on it. My observation is that over the years with Dead & Company you've become more comfortable in this space, and now we hear more moments that break from what people might expect — guitar tapping in "Slipknot!" or "St. Stephen,"

→

Mayer with his PRS Silver Sky, Martin F7 [*left*] and Martin OM-45

genuine shredding in "All Along the Watchtower." Maybe you wouldn't have done these things in 2015 or 2016.

MAYER: That's a really interesting observation. And the answer is very complicated because there are so many variables that were changing from year to year. Let me try to take you on a tour through them. Number one, my understanding of the music in terms of its arrangement, right? These song arrangements, early on I would start playing what I thought was the main full solo in a song. And then when I got to the end of that solo, I would realize, that's the mini solo. [Laughs] Then Bob would go back and sing and I would go, "Oh, no, Bob thinks I wanted to take the mini solo and go that long on it. There's still another solo to go, and that's the big one." So that's one of the things — understanding the arrangements.

Another thing is understanding the totality of the show in terms of the balance of what can be done. On a good night, I can earn myself the right to take one song, leave the [Grateful Dead] philosophy behind and go, you know, pure Jimi Hendrix on "Watchtower." Because that's a cover anyway, right? I definitely feel more latitude to do what I want to do on covers, because the main contributor to the style of that song isn't Jerry Garcia. So I can step up and be me thinking about Jimi, which is, I think, the right thing to do. And it's probably a good moment of release for the audience as well, because it opens up the vocabulary.

Then you've got my interpretation of Jerry's playing style, which took me at least four years to figure out how much was enough and how much was too much. When it came to subdividing the notes. When it came to how fast to play. This happens when you're studying someone's music and that music has existed for a period of time where there's different approaches to that music. The way Jerry played in '69 is totally different than '74. And '74 is completely different from '81. And '81 is completely different from '90. And then to add to that, there is the way in which his music, his guitar playing, has been interpreted since his passing. You have to take all of that into a ball, and then you go, "I'm gonna do my best."

And the constant here is that every tour I've ever done from 2015 on was the best I could have done at that moment. It was only after each tour was over that I would get back in the car and listen to more Grateful Dead recordings and realize I hadn't come close. But the only way to realize you hadn't come close is to have grown somewhere along the line, where you realize you now know better. So to me, every tour up until the Final Tour in '23 was an opportunity to try to get it right, based on everything I had learned previously.

Bob, has your guitar playing changed over the past 10 years with Dead & Company? And do you think having John as your guitar partner has led you to approach the music differently?

WEIR: Yes, but I always do that. And that, I think, is more on account of the fact that I just keep changing. I wake up in the morning and I'm kind of different. You take all those mornings that I woke up kind of different and you add 'em together, and after a while, you start amounting to a different guy. That's kind of where I am now. So I'd be reluctant to say that anybody, whether it be Jerry or John or whoever, drew anything out of me that didn't already want to come out. But one thing I will say about John is that he's one of those deep blues guys. He can listen to a blues tune on a boombox and tell you who it is, who's in the band, what era it's from, who wrote the song, all that kind of stuff, just on a quick listen. He can dissect the music, the various styles of playing. That's somewhere we haven't been yet that I find very interesting.

John, what is something that you've learned from Bob over the years?

MAYER: That's a good question. And don't think my taking a while to answer it means I have to fight to come up with something. It's just that there's so much. But the thing I've learned from Bob is to

> "The thing I've learned from Bob is to let it breathe. And that's changed my playing a lot" JOHN MAYER

let it breathe. And that's changed my playing a lot. I feel like the two of us now have a very deep relationship, almost like a telepathic relationship. I know where I stand with him in the best of ways. He knows where he stands with me in the best of ways. And we don't have to talk about it.

Bob, what have you learned from John?

WEIR: "Don't sweat the small stuff." I don't know if there's more to it than that. I'm constantly evolving, and so is he. And I can't tell if it's on account of what I'm getting from him, or if it's something he's getting from me, but we sort of make room, make allowances, for those kinds of developments. And you know, he is a legendary guitarist. So I might be inclined to be a little bit under-spoken about what I express through my instrument. [pauses] But probably not. Because I remember the first night I played with him, when we were on TV. [In 2015, Mayer guest-hosted several episodes of The Late Late Show. During one of them, Weir, who was promoting the Grateful Dead's upcoming Fare Thee Well concerts, appeared as a guest. Following an interview, the two performed a pair of Grateful Dead songs, "Truckin' " and "Althea" together — a moment often credited with sparking the formation of Dead & Company.] I was surprised at how easy and how natural it was, right from the start. He had already mastered the kind of vocabulary I was used to on the instrument, to the point where we readily interacted. I don't remember any moments where I was thinking to myself, what the hell is he trying to get at here?

John, did you feel that in the moment?

MAYER: Maybe with that song ["Althea"]. But there's only about 140 other ones! [Laughs] I think anyone who plays Grateful Dead music could tell you, you may have one that you can make it through the gauntlet on. But then there's another one waiting right around the corner that might take you another two years to get your head around. But I absolutely love the challenge. Before every show you will see me pacing my dressing room with Spotify open, with some version of some song I think is helpful for me to listen to before I go up to play the whole show, to just remind myself, "This is all it takes." Because I can overthink. You can hear me overthinking on the guitar sometimes. But every night I get to go onstage is a shot at pitching a perfect game. And I can tell you, when I try to pitch a perfect game, I lose my shutout in about the beginning of the second song. And I just love that moment where I go, "Whoops, not a perfect game. Have fun!"

Up until now, Dead & Company has been strictly a live entity. But back in the early days of the band, 2016 or so, I recall interviews where Bob would talk about maybe going into the studio, either to record new material or to revisit songs that had only ever been played onstage by the Grateful Dead. Is this still a possibility?

WEIR: Oh, it's something I would still love to do. We've got our best guys on it...

MAYER: It hasn't been discussed in a while, but I have a boilerplate response to ideas like that. Which is, "If Bobby and Mickey want to do it, I want to do it." You know what I mean? I want to follow them where they want to go. So if that's something that naturally comes up and it starts to materialize, you won't see me being the one to say no.

Clearly, you're still up for anything. You did the Final Tour in 2023, and just a year later, reimagined the Dead & Company experience for the Sphere residency. Is there anything you'd still like to explore with this band?

WEIR: I wouldn't mind taking it across the seas. This is a quintessentially American music that we're doing, and I would love to play it for people everywhere. It would be nice to be able to do that. Because we put on a pretty tight show. And for what it's worth, these are the same songs we've been playing all along, but we've somehow learned to make it a little more accessible. So whereas people from other cultures may have heard us in the past and maybe were not really able to relate, I think we could do better now.

What about you, John? As the guy who took the lead in helping to manifest the Sphere experience, what's the next frontier for Dead & Company?

MAYER: Well, right now someone somewhere is coming up with an idea that's so ahead of its time, I couldn't think of it. But I like that they think of, and for the last 60 years have thought of, Grateful Dead — even though we're not Grateful Dead, but Bob and Mickey represent that — as one of the first bands you would think to ask to be a part of these ideas. Because the mission statement has always been forward-facing. The music is so vast, they're who you'd want to use for whatever your technology is. So I think it made sense to do the Sphere. And whoever dreams up the next something incredible and wants us to be a part of it? I would never say no to that kind of experimentalism.

MADE IN JAPAN

We dig into the Japanese guitar industry of the 1960s and 70s and find notable brands, mischievous copies, diligent makers and original designs that led to the electric guitar's renaissance in the 1980s and beyond

Words Tony Bacon **Photography** Phil Barker

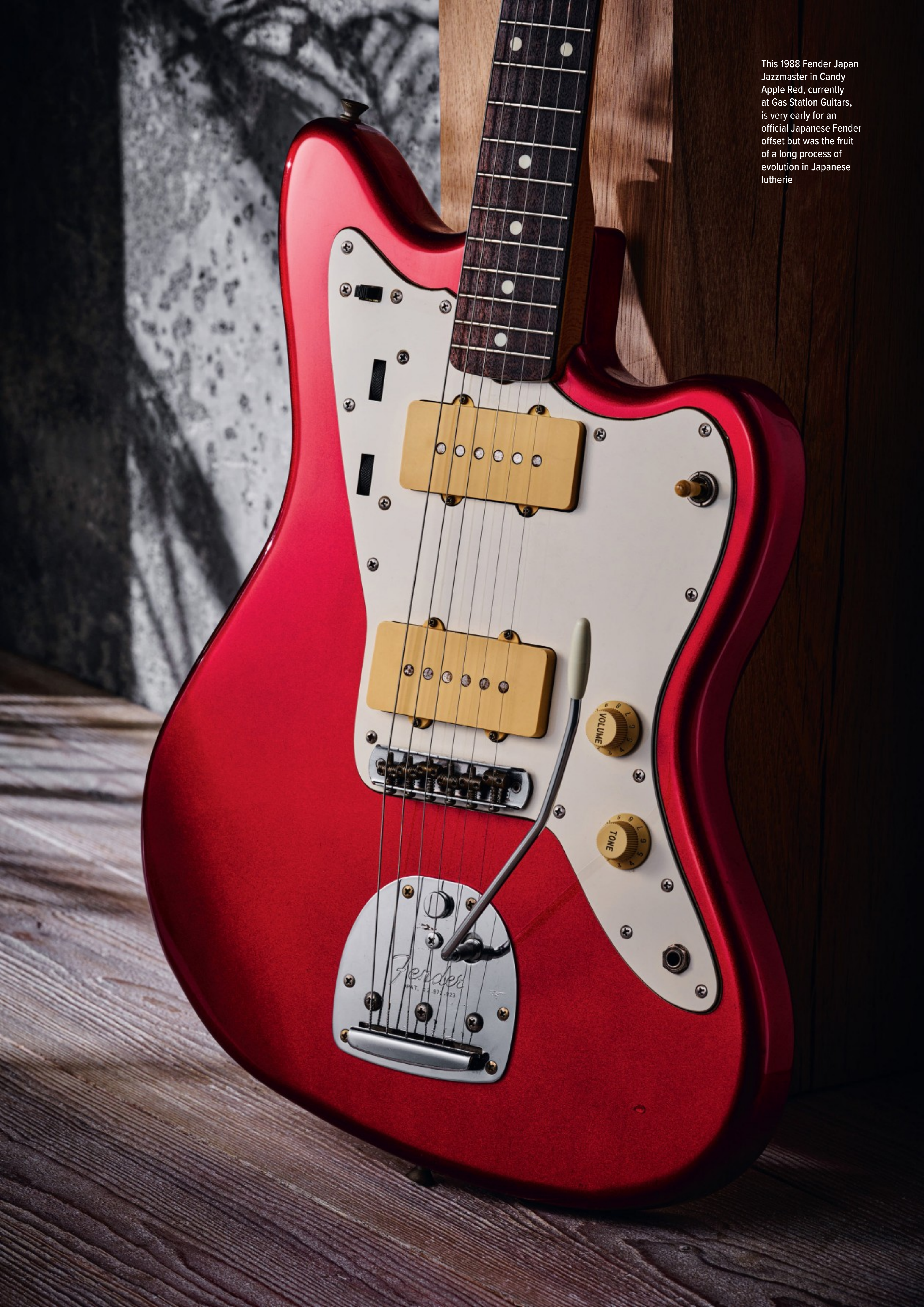
It's the late 70s, and Paul Stanley of KISS tells an interviewer about the band's great successes – he guesses they've sold something like 20 million records, and they're just back from a Japanese tour. It was there, he says, that he found out more about the abilities of Japanese guitar makers. He discovered they have the skills, as he puts it, "to make anything". That's a lot more than can be said for America at the moment, he adds. "Japan," Stanley concludes, "really is the country of the future."

Japan's guitar industry was certainly healthy when he made those comments, and it surely had no reason to doubt that the future would be just as rosy. It had overcome a shaky start, when critics said it simply copied well-known designs, and it had weathered some crippling ups and downs. Now, though, Japanese companies were showing themselves in many cases to be the equal of American makers – and in some cases perhaps to have overtaken them. Let's take a look at how that came about and who made it happen.

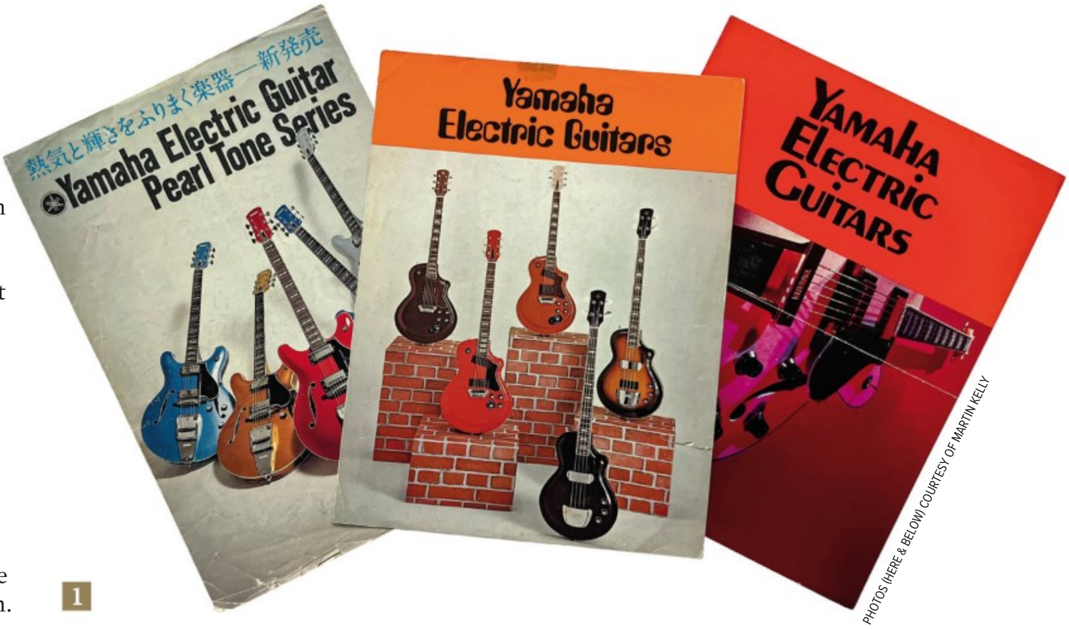
EARLY ORIGINALS

The origins of perhaps the most famous Japanese guitar brand, Ibanez, lie with its parent company, Hoshino. Matsujirou Hoshino started the family business around 1900 in Nagoya, about 175 miles west of Tokyo, when he opened a store to sell books and stationery. He soon added a section for musical instruments run by his son, Yoshitarou, who set up Hoshino Gakki Ten – the Hoshino Musical Instrument Store company.

Following a tour by the great Spanish classical guitarist Andrés Segovia in 1929, which inspired many Japanese people to take up the instrument, Hoshino began importing Salvador Ibáñez guitars from Spain. The Spanish factory closed by the late 30s, so Hoshino adopted the name for itself and made acoustic guitars in Japan, at first branded as Ibanez Salvador and soon simply as Ibanez. The company began to offer electric guitars around 1957, and from then until the mid-60s Hoshino made some instruments itself in its new Tama Seisaku Shone factory, set up in 1959, but also



This 1988 Fender Japan Jazzmaster in Candy Apple Red, currently at Gas Station Guitars, is very early for an official Japanese Fender offset but was the fruit of a long process of evolution in Japanese lutherie


熱気と輝きをふりまく楽器—新発売
Yamaha Electric Guitar Pearl Tone Series
Yamaha Electric Guitars
YAMAHA ELECTRIC GUITARS
1

PHOTOS (HERE & BELOW) COURTESY OF MARTIN KELLY

1. Yamaha was a 60s success story and pace-setter for original guitar designs made in Japan. Other brands either took a more quirky approach to designing new guitars or, more frequently, cloned the work of big US brands – setting the scene for landmark legal battles

bought in guitars from other Japanese firms.

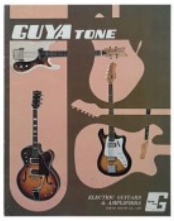
Some of the early Japanese guitars from this time had features loosely borrowed from American Fender and Gibson, say, or British Burns models. Not exactly copies – they didn't duplicate every detail of an existing model – but more like Japanese interpretations of Western designs with touches of Eastern taste.

In Japan in the 60s, many budding young guitarists were just as keen to form groups and find stardom as anyone in America, Britain – or anywhere else that the pop bug had bitten. In Japan, the scene was known as Eleki and then Group Sounds, and bands such as The Spacemen, The Blue Comets, and The Jacks enjoyed success.

Japanese companies, including the big names like Teisco and Hoshino/Ibanez, not only sold electrics to that growing home market but also began to actively export instruments, notably to wholesalers in Europe, the United States, Australia and elsewhere. And a complication arises here for anyone trying to grasp the ins and outs of Japanese guitar history.

It ought to be simple: companies manufactured guitars and either sold them at home or exported them. However, many of the foreign customers who bought instruments from Japan had their own brand names put on the guitars. This is often called OEM – original equipment manufacturer – which means a company that makes a product to be sold by another company under its own name. It meant nearly identical instruments being sold in various locations bearing different brands and, conversely, guitars with one brand originating from a variety of sources. Add to this an array of often interrelated factories and sales agents and distributors, and the picture can be a baffling one.

Japanese companies like Teisco and Hoshino/Ibanez sold electrics to the growing home market and also actively exported instruments



Guyatone instruments enjoyed some success in the hands of blues and rock guitarists such as Rory Gallagher, but the company was founded in the 1930s

For example, the American and British firms that bought from Hoshino in the early days used brands such as Antoria and Star in the UK and Maxitone and Montclair in the USA, among several others, although some guitars did have Ibanez on them. Some Ibanez catalogues from the period feature guitars with blank headstocks, accentuating the 'your-name-here' policy.

There was similar OEM activity at Teisco – a firm born in Tokyo in the 40s, adding guitars in 1952 and electrics a couple of years later. Its exports to Europe and America had brand names such as Audition, Top Twenty, Gemtone, Jedson, Mellowtone, Kent, Kingston, and Norma. Teisco also sold a line of models at home with its own Teisco brand and, from around 1965 in the USA, Teisco Del Rey.

Teisco had success through its American distributors – at first Westheimer, who later bought from Kawai, and then WMI, who came onboard around the time the Teisco Del Rey brand name appeared. The Sears, Roebuck mail-order catalogue company was another US customer for Teisco, who provided some of the guitars Sears sold with its own Silvertone brand.

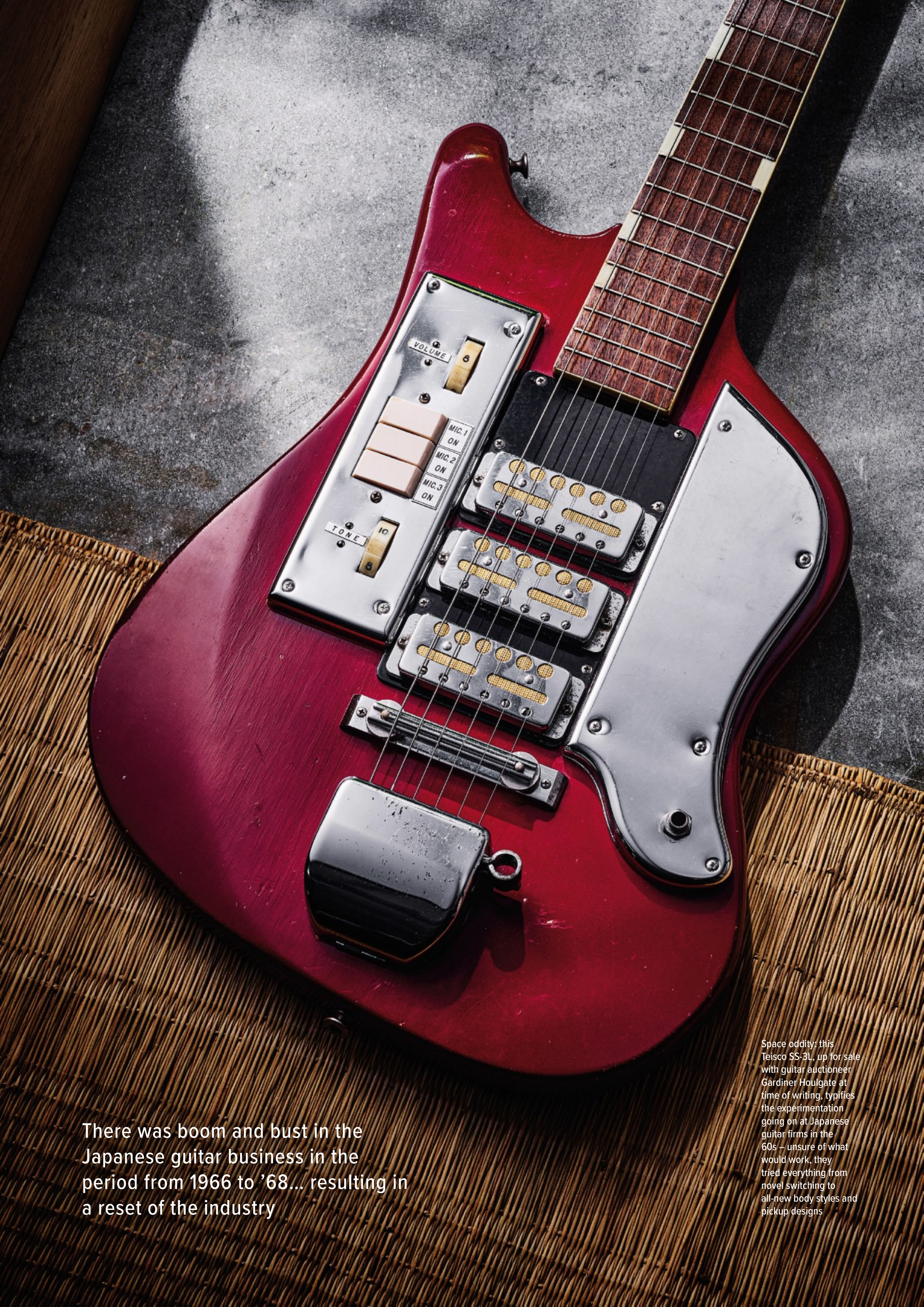
And here's another wrinkle: as with many of the firms for whom Teisco made guitars, the Silvertone models exported to America by Teisco were sometimes almost identical to a Teisco-brand instrument sold at home. An example of this is the mid-60s four-pickup Silvertone 1437, which in the homeland was the Teisco ET-440.

In 1965, Teisco sponsored a movie, *Eleki No Wakadaisho* ('The Young Electric Guitar Wizard'). It starred guitarist Yuzo Kayama as a member of the fictional Young Beats group, who entered a battle-of-the-bands competition – and, naturally, they all played Teisco guitars through Teisco amps. Despite such cultural landmarks, as well as the opening of a new factory in Okegawa and the export of instruments to Britain, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the US and elsewhere, Teisco battled with financial problems. It declared bankruptcy early in '67 and was bought by Kawai, which continued to use the Teisco brand for a few more years.

GUYATONE, KAWAI, YAMAHA, ARIA

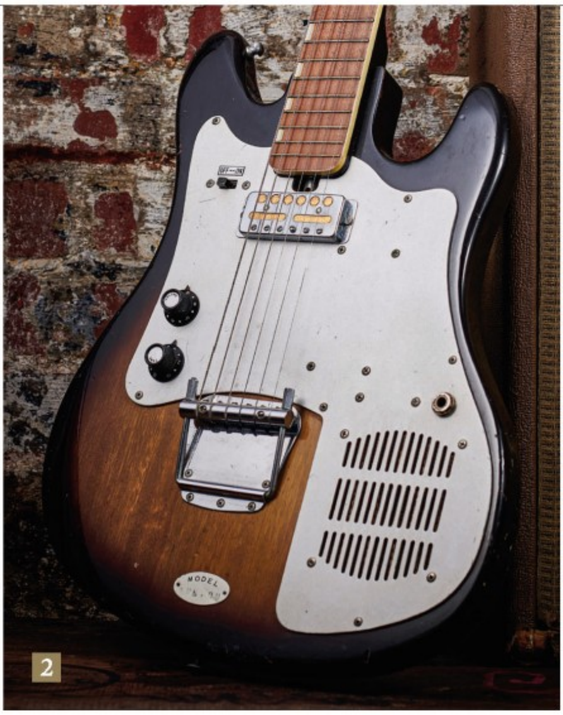
Rivalling Teisco and Hoshino/Ibanez as the big name in 60s Japanese guitars was Guyatone. It was founded by Mitsuo Matsuki in Tokyo in the 1930s, introduced its first solidbody electric in the mid-50s, and its LG models in particular proved popular in Britain and elsewhere toward the end of that decade. These early LGs were sold in America by Buegeleisen & Jacobson (as Winston), and in Britain by Arbiter (as Guyatone) and JT Coppock (as Antoria).

Guyatone's range and quality expanded during the 60s, with models such as the LG-160T,



Space oddity: this Teisco SS-3L, up for sale with guitar auctioneer Gardiner Houlgate at time of writing, typifies the experimentation going on at Japanese guitar firms in the 60s – unsure of what would work, they tried everything from novel switching to all-new body styles and pickup designs

There was boom and bust in the Japanese guitar business in the period from 1966 to '68... resulting in a reset of the industry



2. Rory Gallagher's 1965 Teisco TRG-1, which, with its Gold Foil pickup and internal loudspeaker, typifies how Japanese makers of the era tried to win over players with unusual features, styling and sounds

complete with a handy body-hole, as well as a couple of SG and MG hollowbodies, and the LG-200T, which had four pickups and multiple push-button selectors.

Probably the best-known Guyatone today is the Sharp 5 signature model, introduced in 1967. The Sharp 5 band, part of the Group Sounds trend that spread across Japan at this time, was led by Munetaka Inoue and guitarist Nobuhiro Mine, and their break came in '67 when they signed to Columbia Records. Guyatone saw an opportunity for a liaison with the band, renaming its LG-350T guitar as the Sharp 5 model. Mine played the 350 Deluxe, with blue finish, three pickups and gold-plated metalwork.

Kawai dates back to the 1920s, when Koichi Kawai started a keyboard company in Hamamatsu. The firm began making guitars in the 50s, expanding its Kawai-brand lines during the next decade and exporting widely to OEM customers. Among the brand names used in the US were Domino, Kent, Kimberly and TeleStar. By the late 60s Kawai had become another big player in Japanese guitar making.

These companies still competed for attention in the home market, and a notable new contender in the mid-60s was Yamaha. It was, of course, an old name, founded in the 1880s as a keyboard manufacturer and diversifying as the decades went by into many other areas, not least motorcycles.

Tokai in particular made players think anew about what 'Japanese guitar' could mean – and sent shockwaves through the industry

The first Yamaha budget electrics appeared in 1964, and then the better SG models two years later. Among these early SGs were the conventionally shaped and Fender-inspired SG-2 and 3, along with the reverse-body Mosrite-influenced SG-5 and 7, with an extended lower horn to the body and a long, slim headstock. The flipped-body style of Mosrite's Ventures model was a popular shape among Japanese makers following the American band's successful tour of the country in 1964.

Quaint designs, such as this Californian Rebel by Domino, aimed to capture the free spirit of American rock – but looked like nothing else. Today, they have cult appeal

The Arai company, founded in Nagoya by the classical guitarist Shiro Arai in 1956, made classicals at first but added electric guitars in the early 60s, soon using the Aria and Aria Diamond brands. In the 70s and later the company would become better known for its Aria Pro II brand. Aria was the Japanese distributor of Fender guitars in the late 50s, so it's not surprising that some of its own models were Fender-like in appearance.

THE JAPANESE GUITAR GAME

Let's step aside for a moment and play 'Loser, Looker, Player'. We'll tell you ours, to get things going, and then you can have a go.

LOSER: Our choice is an Ibanez copy of a Gibson double-neck. Did you say 'so what'? Ibanez introduced the line in 1974, about six years after Gibson had dropped its SG-style originals, and offered a six-string plus 12-string (model 2402) and a six-string plus bass (2404). So far, so Gibson. But here's our choice of Loser: Ibanez Model 2406 boasted two six-string necks. Correct, two six-strings on one (rather heavy) body. Gibson had never made such a thing, of course, but Ibanez had other ideas. This guitar, it enthused, would be good to have to hand in "open-tuning slide guitar and standard tuning". We rest our (rather large) case.

LOOKER: An impressive example of over-the-top Teisco Del Rey style was the solidbody Spectrum 5, introduced in 1966. It was a luscious creation, with a thin, curving, sculpted mahogany body, covered with what Teisco claimed as "seven coats of lacquer", parachute-shape fingerboard inlays, a spring-less vibrato, two jacks for mono or stereo output, and three pickups, split so as to assist with the Spectrum 5's stereo feed when required. The model name derived from what Teisco described as "five different basic colour tones [that] can be produced with this unusual guitar", indicating the colourful pickup and phase switches on the upper part of the model's pickguard. Spectacular!

PLAYER: How about a Tokai Les Paul Reborn? The firm began soon after World War II in Hamamatsu and launched Tokai electrics in 1967. 10 years later, the copies began. Yes, there were many copies about, but Tokai in particular and its Les Pauls-styles (and Strat-styles and more) made players think anew about what 'Japanese guitar' could mean – and sent shockwaves through parts of the instrument industry. The Les Pauls came with a few different names during the key period from 1978 to '85 or so, and they looked the part, too, some bearing 'wow-could-it-be-a-'59' flamey tops, and many found them to be great players at decent prices. One of Tokai's cheeky British ads turned the tables with a headline that read: "Beware of imitations." This did not go unnoticed.

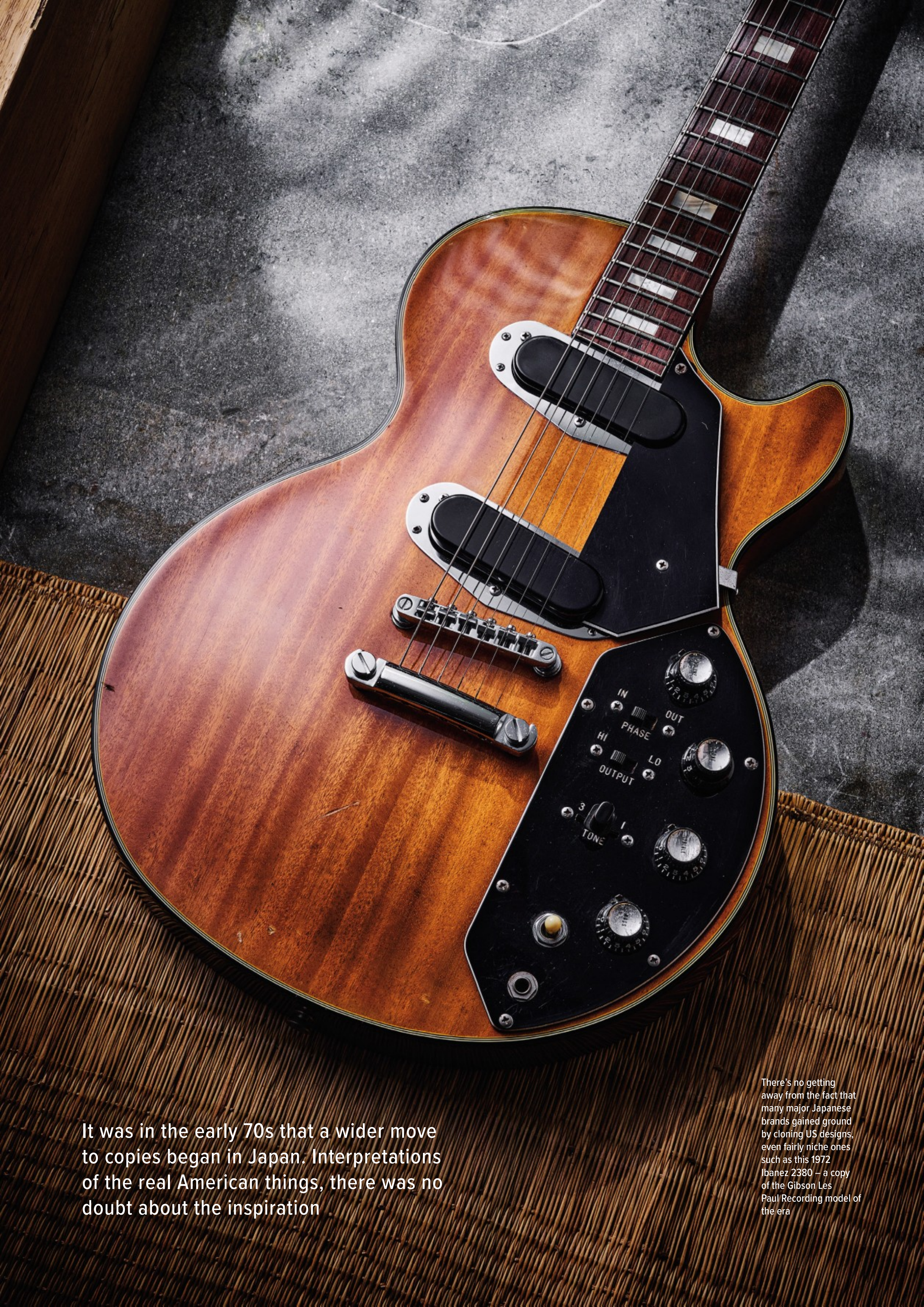
COPYCAT CRAZY

There was boom and bust in the Japanese guitar business in the period from 1966 to '68. One of the factors may have been the USA's doubling of customs duties on imported electrics, and domestically some makers were caught with excessive stocks when demand died, at home as well as abroad.

Whatever the causes, the bust toppled Teisco, Guyatone and others, resulting in a reset of the industry. Some of the stronger businesses survived, including

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARTIN KELLY



There's no getting away from the fact that many major Japanese brands gained ground by cloning US designs, even fairly niche ones such as this 1972 Ibanez 2380 – a copy of the Gibson Les Paul Recording model of the era

It was in the early 70s that a wider move to copies began in Japan. Interpretations of the real American things, there was no doubt about the inspiration

Aria, Fujigen and Yamaha. But the upheaval at this time provides yet another complication for anyone expecting a straightforward situation where guitar A was made by B, has the brand C, and was sold by D. The rest of the alphabet will come in handy if you want to dig deeper.

To generalise, then, it was in the early 70s that a wider move to copies began in Japan. These could still be described as interpretations of the real American things, but now there was no doubt about the models that provided the inspiration. Hoshino had been sourcing guitars from Teisco and Fujigen Gakki since it shifted its Tama factory to drums only in 1965, and by 1970 Fujigen was its main supplier, coinciding with this emphasis on copies. Hoshino continued as a trading company, one that buys and sells products without manufacturing anything itself.

Fuji Gen Gakki Seizou Kabushikigaisha – the Fuji Stringed-Instrument Manufacturing Corporation – was started by Yuuichirou Yokouchi and Yutaka Mimura and produced its first guitar, a basic nylon-string acoustic, during 1960, adding electrics three years later. It had a new factory operational by 1965, based in Matsumoto, home to several furniture makers and guitar builders. As well as its OEM work, Fujigen had its Greco brand, in partnership with distributor Kanda Shokai.

Fujigen's Greco and Hoshino/Ibanez copies were among the most popular of the period, and some of the initiative to make and develop them came from American and British outlets. The first British distributor to buy Ibanez-brand guitars from Hoshino was Maurice Summerfield, who started doing business with them in 1964. From the early 70s, he added the CSL brand for electrics alongside Ibanez, and then the Sumbro brand as a cheaper line below Ibanez and CSL.

In America, one of the outlets Hoshino worked with was Harry Rosenbloom's Medley Music store in Philadelphia, and his Elger Company became Hoshino's eastern US distributor for Tama and Elger guitars, Elger banjos and Star drums. In 1972, Hoshino and Elger set up a joint venture to become the American distributor of Ibanez guitars as well as Hoshino's other brands and instruments, and a few years later Hoshino took sole ownership of the operation that had become its valuable American HQ.

Staff at the new offices, both Japanese and American, noticed that at first the quality wasn't great on some of the guitars shipped over to them, and they fed regular suggestions and ideas back to Japan, many of which were used to broaden and improve the lines.

TEISCO
TEISCO
electric guitars
musical amplifiers
guitar mikes
Custom Crafted for the Modern Sound Music
TEISCO Del Rey
you'll be in good company with TEISCO del rey
TEISCO Del Rey

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARTIN KELLY

3. Teisco Del Rey's marketing brochures promised popularity through music made on its striking guitars

4. This Teisco Del Rey Spectrum 5, which belongs to Andy Fairweather Low (see interview, page 74), has stood the test of time as one of the more usable, even low-key iconic, original designs from 60s Japan

Maurice Summerfield in Britain recommended that Hoshino add to the line a copy of a Gibson Flying V, recently given a low-key revival by Gibson. As with the original Les Pauls, players at the time were rediscovering the excellence of old Vs. Ibanez launched a Flying V copy in 1973 based on a late-60s original that Summerfield sent to them, and soon a Gibson double-neck copy appeared, again thanks to Summerfield's encouragement.

Some of the initiative for Fujigen to make and develop copies during the 60s came from American and British outlets

MONO
STEREO

By 1976, Les Paul copies were the most numerous in the Ibanez catalogue, with more than 20 varieties on offer. In the USA, they were pitched from the cheapest, the best-selling bolt-neck $260 (AU$400) Les Custom 2350, through the $299.50 (AU$470) Les Deluxe 59'er 2340 in sunburst and the $340 (AU$530) Sunlight Special 2342IV, and up to the most expensive – a set-neck version of the 2350, the $495 (AU$780) 2650CS Solid Body DX. That same year, Gibson's regular line of five Les Paul solidbody models ranged from the $599 (AU$940) Les Paul Deluxe to the $739 (AU$1,160) Les Paul Custom,

You won't get far in the world of Japanese electric guitar history without coming across the word 'lawsuit'

Typical of the so-called 'Lawsuit Era' electrics made in Japan is this 1975 Ibanez copy of a Gibson ES-335, which at time of writing is up for auction at guitar sales specialist Gardiner Houlgate as part of a collection of Japanese guitars so it's not difficult to understand one of the prime attractions of the copies, beyond any considerations of accuracy or quality.

There were many other Japanese companies making copies, of varying quality and exported with any number of brands, including Penco, Mann, Jason, Kasuga, Heerby, Burny, Tokai, Fernandes, Honey, Conrad, Ventura, Fresher, Electra and HS Anderson. Fujigen and Kanda Shokai's house brand, Greco, was in the upper bracket of quality, and by 1981 Greco's Stratocaster copy line ranged from the SE-380, which retailed at 38,000 yen, up to the SE-1200, at 120,000 yen. A straightforward conversion into US dollars of the time provides an equivalent range of about $260 to $530 (AU$410 to AU$830). That same year, Fender's cheapest Stratocaster retailed for $720 (AU$1,130).

LAWSUIT? WHAT LAWSUIT?

You won't get far in the world of Japanese electric guitar history without coming across the word 'lawsuit'. In the 70s, Ibanez in particular and Japanese brands in general were irritating the hell out of Gibson, Fender and the other US companies targeted by the copyists.

It wasn't until 1977 that Gibson made a legal complaint to Ibanez (through its US arm, Elger). Gibson and Ibanez/Elger settled out of court, with Elger agreeing to stop infringing Gibson's trademarked headstock design and to stop using Gibson-like model names in sales material. In February 1978, Gibson's complaint was closed.

In fact, Ibanez was already using a new headstock design, and had been offering some original-design guitars for a number of years. That term 'lawsuit' stems from this brief legal spat and is often used these days to describe any Japanese copy guitar of the period, whether or not the brand suffered legal action. Oddly, it's gained a cachet, presumably because 'lawsuit-era guitar' sounds more dramatic than '70s Japanese guitar'.

One of the reasons Fender chose Fujigen to manufacture its first Squier guitars in the early 80s was because Fender's strategy to beat the Japanese copies was simply to make better copies itself, with the added prestige of its own brand. And Fujigen's existing Greco guitars proved that Fujigen was already good at what Fender required. Gibson later reset its Epiphone brand in similar ways – and Epiphones had first been made in Japan way back in 1969. These developments, and guitars such as Yamaha's SG2000 in the 70s and the Ibanez Steve Vai-related JEMs of the 80s, would underline a new confidence among Japanese makers.

PHOTO BY JESSE WILD

5. Ibanez made a stunningly succesful pivot from copyist to a genuine innovator with a new generation of original models made for high-performance players that redefined guitar design, such as this original 1987 JEM in sought-after Desert Sun Yellow finish, shot at World Guitars

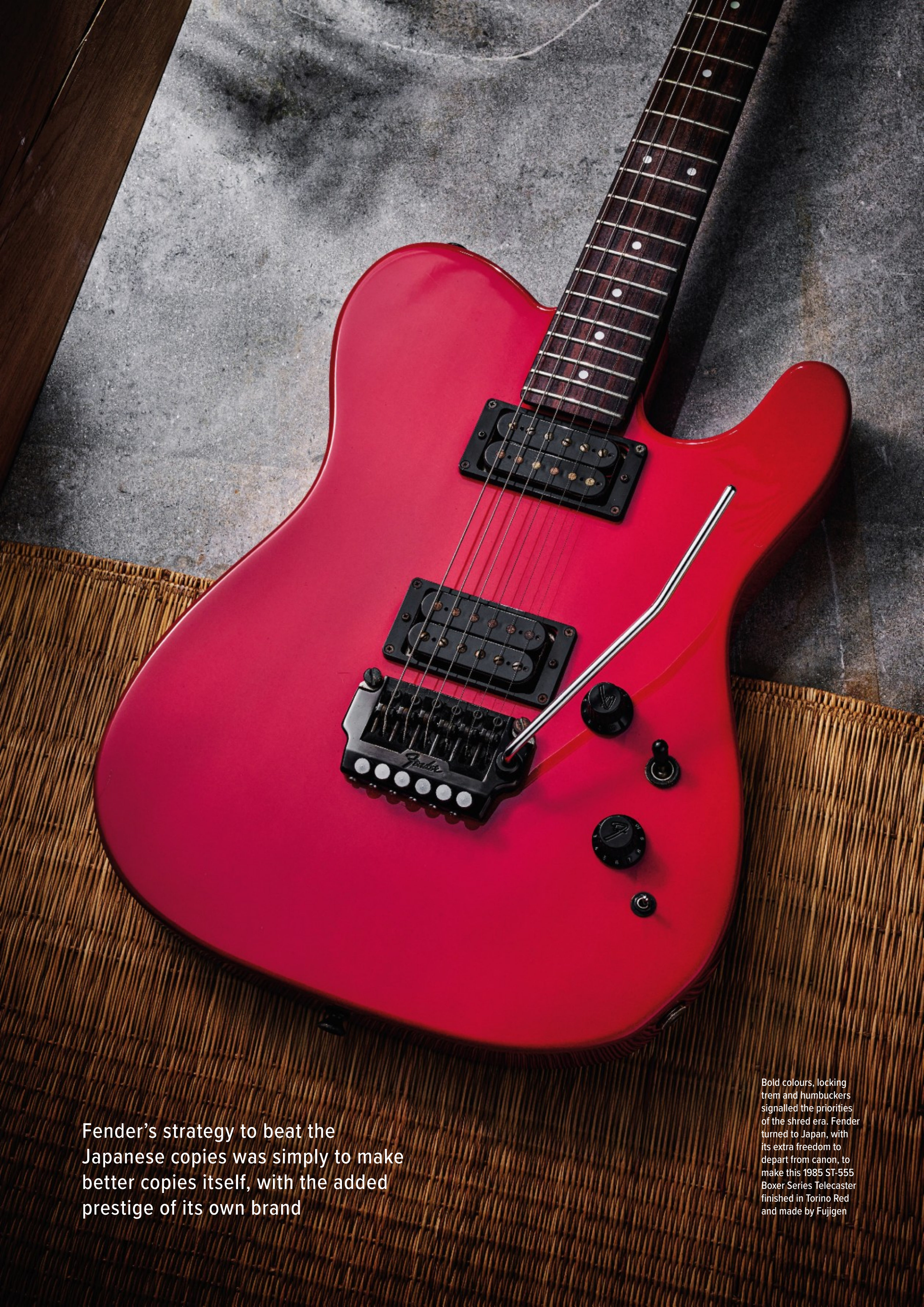
One of the original designs that Ibanez (and Greco) introduced well before the Gibson legal complaint was The Flash, introduced in 1975 and soon renamed the Iceman (Ibanez) and M series (Greco). There were influences at work, for sure, the body looking as if someone had given a Firebird a curved, pointed base and added a Ricky-like hooked lower horn. But it added up to an attention-grabbing original. And in 1978, a signature version for Paul Stanley appeared. Ibanez also made him a custom PS10 with a cracked-mirror front, providing sparkling reflections at KISS's already dazzling shows. No wonder Stanley thought that in the guitar-making world, Japan was the country of the future.

With thanks to Gardiner Houlgate (www.gardinerhoulgate.co.uk) and Gas Station Guitars (www.gasstationguitars.com)

> Ibanez was already using a new headstock design, and had been offering some original-design guitars for a number of years

Art Wave
FERNANDES ELECTRIC SOUND RESEARCH GROUP
6

6. A new generation of 80s synth-pop acts inspired new designs from Japanese makers such as this Fernandes Art Wave electric, currently residing at Gas Station Guitars in Somerset



Fender's strategy to beat the Japanese copies was simply to make better copies itself, with the added prestige of its own brand

Bold colours, locking trem and humbuckers signalled the priorities of the shred era. Fender turned to Japan, with its extra freedom to depart from canon, to make this 1985 ST-555 Boxer Series Telecaster finished in Torino Red and made by Fujigen

CLONE WARS

The 60s might have given birth to the Japanese guitar industry, but things got really interesting in the 80s when ever-more accurate and high-quality copies of classic US electrics emerged and even received official sanction from some US guitar brands. Keith Anderson of Japanese specialist Gas Station Guitars picks up the story

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

The 1960s and 70s were formative years for the Japanese guitar industry, but they really hit their stride in the 80s with official Fender reissues, accurate clones of Les Pauls and the like. What models stand out, for you, from this period, we ask Keith?

"The late 70s through to the early 80s is when Japanese brands like Tokai and Greco really got their act together with the Les Paul clones. Tokai, from around '78 to about '85, were doing the LS Series, which was originally called the Reborn series – a range of Les Paul copies – though after a while they changed the name to Love Rock. But the original LS series, from the LS-50 all the way to the LS-120, are amazing guitars. The LS-50 that was built from the late 70s to the early 80s was the entry-level model, basically a three-piece-top Les Paul clone. I get them every now and then. They put to death any theories that Les Pauls shouldn't have a three-piece top because they're amazing guitars. And that was only their entry-level model, you know? They still stand up today.

"Then Tokai went to the LS-60, which was a step above and had a two-piece top. Again, a really good guitar. And then there was the LS-80 and they went to a two-piece top with a nitro finish for that. After that they had the really high-end stuff: an LS-120 that was nitro finished and made around 1983/'84. For some reason, the Japanese would put veneer tops on the higher-end models, like the [Greco] EGF-1200, just so they could get a really good-looking maple flame. So they kind of deviated a bit from the standard build by putting this veneer over the top – which was kind of weird because those were their highest-quality models, although, to me, they still sound great. However, there are some solid-top EGF-1200 Grecos and they're really, really collectible. But most of them you'll find will have the veneer top on because they could choose a better flame for that.

"Tokia's LS series are probably the best-built Les Paul-style guitars that have ever come through my shop"
KEITH ANDERSON

"Another thing that probably sets the Greco apart a little bit from the Tokai is the pickups they were using. So the EGF-1200 came as stock with Dry Z pickups from Maxon, which are fantastic pickups. I think a lot of people look out now for EGF-1200s purely for the pickups, which command a really high price on their own."

Of the better quality clones did one brand – Tokai or Greco, for example – stand out as better than the others for quality?

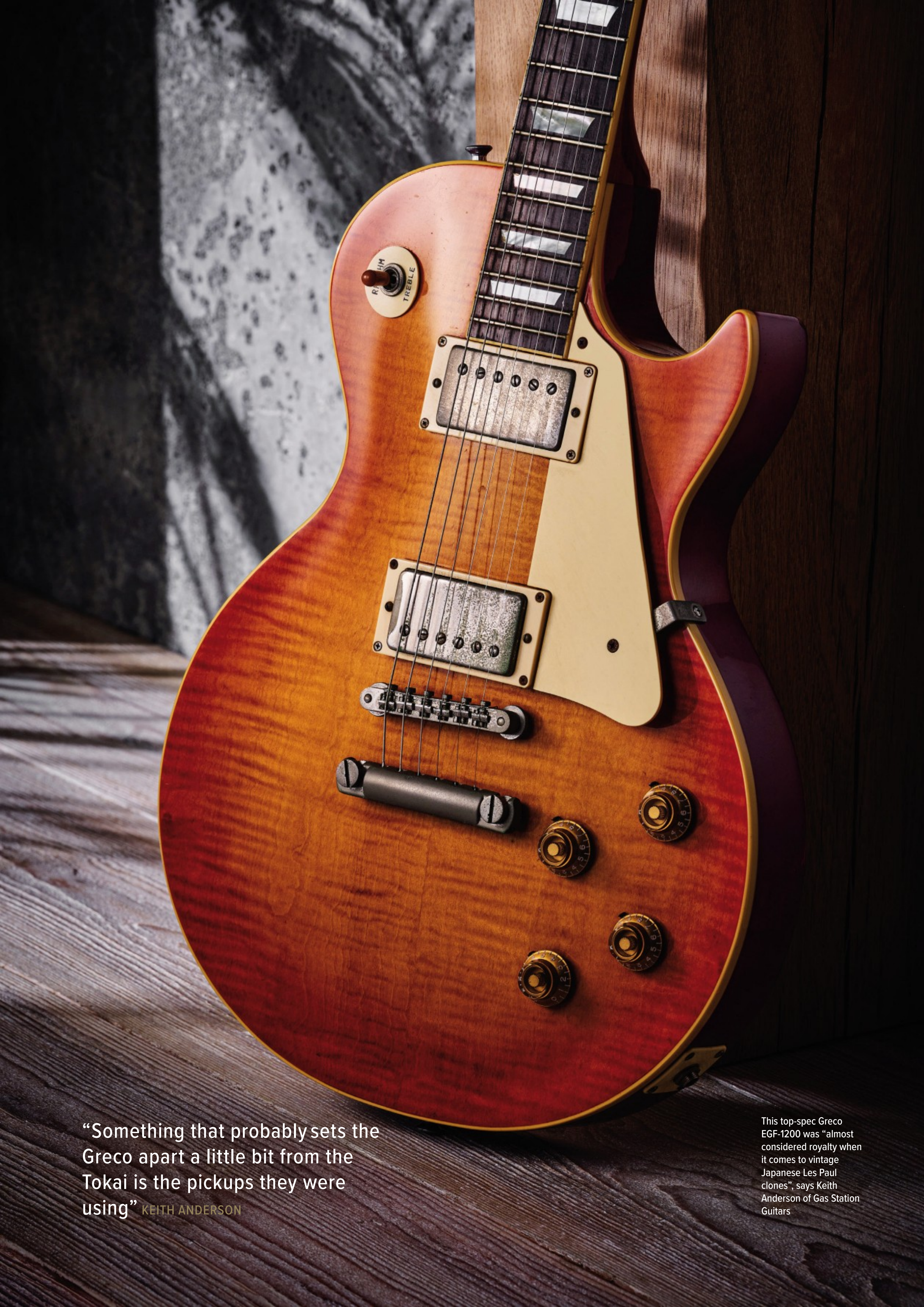
"No, I don't think so, although personally I prefer the Tokais. In that period between '78 to about '85, the LS series were absolutely amazing guitars. Regardless of the electronics, they're probably the best-built Les Paul-style guitars that have ever come through my shop. If they ever come up for sale [in Japan], I buy them and I've got quite a few in my own collection. For build quality, they were the best there was at the time. It should be said that the pickups on the entry-level models, like the LS-50, weren't great. But if you swap them out for something better you've got a fantastic Les Paul-style guitar that you never want to let go."

Greco
Order made Electric Guitars
Catalogue
Greco
Greco
Electric Guitars

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARTIN KELLY

7

7. Greco and Tokai both specialised in clones of well-known Fender and Gibson electrics. The main problem this posed for the US firms was that their offerings were well built and very competitively priced. Eventually, both Fender and Gibson (via its Orville By Gibson sub-brand) realised that to beat them, they'd need to join them and launch officially sanctioned Japanese production models themselves



> “Something that probably sets the Greco apart a little bit from the Tokai is the pickups they were using” KEITH ANDERSON

This top-spec Greco EGF-1200 was “almost considered royalty when it comes to vintage Japanese Les Paul clones”, says Keith Anderson of Gas Station Guitars

8. Fender Japan initially concentrated on Strats and Teles, but, partly driven by the popularity of grunge, offsets followed in the 90s, such as this 1966 Reissue Jaguar with matching headstock, kindly loaned by Gas Station Guitars

How about on the Fender side of things – how did the copyists come to make official Fender Japan guitars?

"Japan was doing a lot of Fender copies throughout the 70s, to varying degrees of quality – they were a bit hit and miss. But it was Tokai that Fender noticed. Basically, Fender said, 'Hang on a minute: these are really good.' I believe Fender were originally thinking they had to have a presence in Japan because the clones were getting so good. And I think it was their intention to use Tokai to start making Fender guitars. But in the end, it went to Fujigen, who basically started building the first Fenders for them.

"At the time, in the late 70s, I think the costs of building guitars in Japan was significantly less than it was in the US. So it was the two reasons, really: to get the cost down, and also to actually have a presence in Asia where – kind of like China is today – they were just cloning everything with varying degrees of success. But Fender identified Tokai as the best.

"At that point, they were building the 'Springy Sound' Strat clone and Fender must have felt, 'They are as good, if not better, than we are at doing this. So let's go to Japan to start building Fenders [under licence]'. I don't know why, but in the end they did end up going to Fujigen [rather than Tokai] and they built Fenders up until that ended in 1997. Tokai took over production briefly – literally just for a few months – until Dyna Gakki could handle the full level of production that Fujigen had been producing."

Were the vintage-style Fender guitars they made pretty faithful to the originals?

"I don't think Japan ever really set out to make exact replicas of classic American models. But they would give them a name that would hint at that – so the model name ST 62 would be basically saying that this is a version of a 1962 Strat, and there'd also be an ST 65 and an ST 72, for example. But Fender Japan never really had a custom shop together in the same sense that the US did. So I don't think it was ever really about creating the exact replicas of the classic guitars, just having a version that evoked a certain era and that they believed would be more appealing to Japanese people.

"For example, the range of finishes was miles better than the US and I think it still is, to be honest – which really appeals to the culture. They also used a lot of different tone woods for the Japanese guitars. So the earlier models would start off with basswood and then go to alder and ash for the Telecasters. A lot of the Japanese guitar necks vary a lot from the American necks – and I find they tend to be on the slimmer side, especially on the offsets."

Did Fender Japan make the full range of classic models right from the start?

"No, in the early days it was mainly Strats and Telecasters. The offsets didn't really get into production till the early 90s, I would say. They didn't start churning out Jaguars, Jazzmasters or Mustangs until then, and grunge and Nirvana had something to do with that. But they were building the odd Jazzmaster and Jaguar in the 80s. We've had a few through and they're a little bit different from the ones they put into mass production in the 90s. For example, they were made from sen ash, whereas later all the main production offsets – Jaguars and Jazzmasters – were alder-bodied. But the earlier ones had sen ash bodies, and they had things like Fender-stamp neckplates, which they removed from the main production models of the offsets.

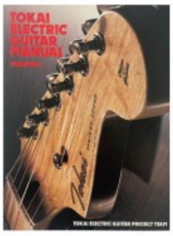
"Outside of that, it was mainly Strats and Teles in the 80s. There were lots of PL 52s as they call them, which was basically their version of a 52 Telecaster. They also did a few 52s with a humbucker, a kind of unofficial version of Keith Richards' Micawber. At the time, Fujigen had a stock of what they called white ash – and the guitars they made out of it were good, but they're absolute boat anchors. So these old Micawber Telecasters will give you back injuries if you play them over the long term! They're like 4.5 or 4.6kg – way heavier than a Les Paul. They got a bit lighter in the 90s, though.

"The range of finishes was miles better than the US and I think it still is – which really appeals to the culture" KEITH ANDERSON

"They also made a few cool things that they didn't really do subsequently. In the 80s, they made a really nice Esquire Custom, an amazing guitar. They're really, really good quality. Although my favourite period of all, for outright quality, is the CIJ Q-serial period between 2002 and 2004, built at Dyna Gakki.

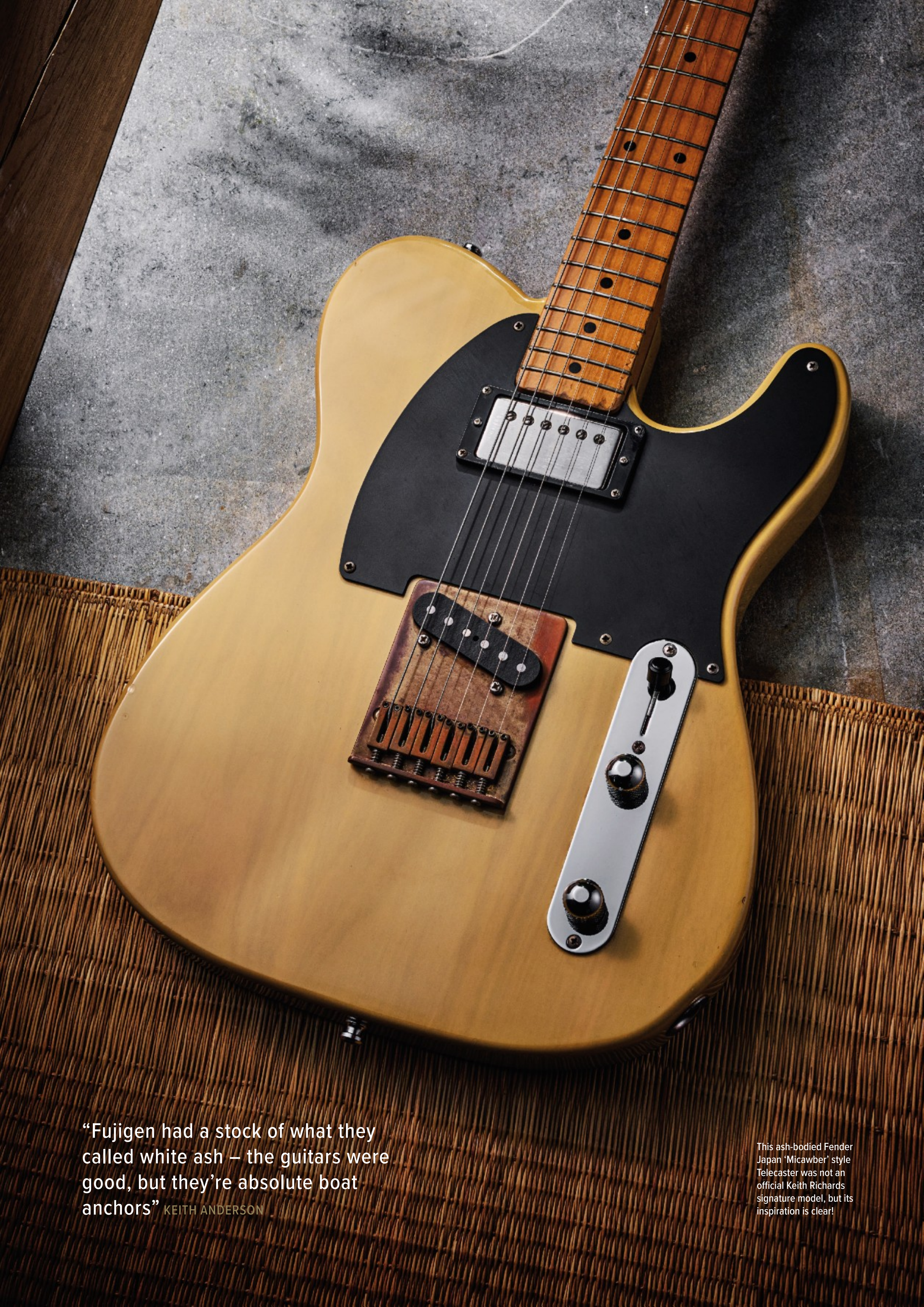
"In conclusion, Fender Japan had a mixed reputation back in the 80s and 90s. I got into them because they were cheap and I was quite heavy-handed on stage and did wreck a few. However, since main production has now mostly moved to Mexico, people are beginning to understand that Fender Japan guitars were on the whole beautifully crafted guitars with excellent quality control. Which has led to them being more sought after today."

www.gasstationguitars.com



A Tokai headstock on the cover of an 80s publication shows the extent to which Fender's original was aped. Note the round string tree

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARTIN KELLY



“Fujigen had a stock of what they called white ash – the guitars were good, but they’re absolute boat anchors” KEITH ANDERSON

This ash-bodied Fender Japan ‘Micawber’ style Telecaster was not an official Keith Richards signature model, but its inspiration is clear!

« BLUEPRINT »

JANGLE UNCHAINED

Since he rose to glory in the mid-80s with The Smiths, Johnny Marr has been the king of crystalline chime. Now, he reveals how his new M-7 Martin signature – complete with octave G string – puts that shimmering voice at your fingertips

Words Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates

Given that it was designed by the man who quit The Smiths at the peak of their powers in 1987 – having single-handedly invented indie-rock – perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that Johnny Marr's new signature Martin M-7 doesn't stick to the script. Teaming with the fabled Pennsylvania-based luthier for the project is a logical move: Marr has been loyal to the Martin brand since he hired his first D-28 for The Smiths' 1985 *Meat Is Murder* album (and refused to give it back).

But from the hybrid body shape to the three-piece back – not to mention the pièce de résistance, an octave G string – the 61-year-old's creation is anything but a cynical rebadge, its widescreen jangle and seventh tuning peg making fans question their eyes and ears when he walks on stage. "You have these instruments that you already think are perfection, so, in my case, the D-28 and D-35," he considers. "But then, when you change or personalise one aspect, you start getting into invention…"

How did this collaboration start?

"Well, Fred Greene [Martin's VP of Product Management] contacted me a couple of years ago. We got together at a show in Pennsylvania, near the Martin factory, and about halfway through our conversation, I realised I was being invited to invent my dream Martin out of thin air. Which was such a privilege and surprise. What Fred drew out of me were my enthusiasms about different aspects of the guitar. So the M-7 and M-6 [the standard six-string equivalent] were designed very organically. I realised I was daydreaming of this ideal acoustic."

The acoustic has always been in your toolkit, hasn't it?

"Yeah. My connection to acoustic guitars goes back to the very first guitar sound I was drawn to, which was the strumming of Don Everly on *Wake Up Little Susie*. But at the same time, also, *C'mon Everybody* by Eddie Cochran, where the acoustics are layered and loud. There's this idea that acoustic guitars are about fingerpicking and folk accompaniment. I'm an acolyte of Bert Jansch, so I can testify to that. But that really loud, layered, straightforward strumming on those rock 'n' roll records is a singular sound. You hear Jeff Lynne pay homage to it on *Runnin' Down A Dream* by Tom Petty. Or *Queen Of Hearts* by Dave Edmunds. They're all echoes of this signature technique that snagged me when I was six or seven.

"I've had a lifetime of doing this now, all my adult life. And I've always incorporated acoustic guitars into what I do. I mean, this thing I'm talking about – just really driving the acoustic into the ground – I did it on a song from my last solo album called *Counter Clock World*. Other times, I'm playing in tunings, which is something I got from Joni Mitchell, via David Crosby. Through all the records I've made, I was very deliberate in putting acoustic guitars to the foreground."

You've said Rory Gallagher was the player who turned you onto Martins?

"Well, that was the first time I ever saw a D-35, when Rory used to do *Out On The Western Plain*. Sadly, but luckily for me, I got to play that very D-35, not long after Rory passed away. And then, my D-28 that I got in the Smiths days in around '85 – I hired that, and within about 10 minutes, I said to myself, 'This is not going back.' That one has magic in it, and I've done a lot with it over the years. But then, almost to break out of that, when I started playing

PHOTO BY RIAZ GOMEZ

> “The concept was [for the M-7] to behave like a regular six-string but have something that just delights your ear”

Johnny Marr has been a Martin devotee since he first got his hands on a D-28 for The Smiths’ *Meat Is Murder* album in 1985

1. Both models are equipped with LR Baggs' Anthem pickup and mic system

2. Solid East Indian rosewood features on the guitars' backs and sides, and there's no room for "any satin finish nonsense" on the neck back, says Johnny

PHOTOS BY ERIC DOWD COURTESY OF MARTIN

with Bert, I used a 70s D-35.

"When I was a kid, I could name the owner and whereabouts of every guitar within a 20-mile radius. And as an adult, I can reel off a whole load of musicians and what acoustic guitar they own. For example, Bernard Butler's got an amazing J-200, as does Ronnie Wood. Then again, one of the best D-28s I ever played belonged to Beth Orton. They really make an impression on me, these guitars. Always have done."

Let's talk about the M-7's flagship feature. What inspired that octave G?

"My friend Bill Puplett – who is sadly no longer with us, but he worked on my guitars from 1987 – we had a conversation about a British blues player in the 60s. I've forgotten his name, but he added an extra tuning peg, pin and string to his acoustic, and pioneered this seven-string model. I also saw Roger McGuinn talking about his signature model on stage in the late 90s. I'd never played a seven-string – or heard one in person. But the concept intrigued me and I hoped it would do what I thought it'd do, which was to behave, technically, like a regular six-string acoustic but have something that just delights your ear."

Sonically, the M-7 seems like a close cousin of a 12-string?

"Over the years, I've always kept up playing 12-string. Every so often, I'll go through phases of playing 12-string to keep my acoustic chops up and not get lazy. And then, a few days into that, I always go through the same thing, which is, I think, 'I'm going to get rid of every six-string I own. There isn't a better sound than this, and anyone who bitches about them being hard to grapple with – buy a tuner.'

> **"Regular six-strings almost sound like they're missing something to me now"**

"However, sometimes you just don't want all of that high-octave stuff. So my M-7 does what you think it's going to do, but it sounds like it's got added production on it. When I've been using it live, I tend to forget that it's even got the high octave on it. And then, sometimes, I'll really dig in and make a point of playing a little more around that octave. I've been living with it now for a long time and I've found that regular six-strings almost sound like they're missing something to me now."

It's that little bit of extra harmonic information, isn't it?

"Exactly. Within minutes, you forget it's there. But you'd notice if it disappeared. In spite of that, it was my idea to do the six-string version [M-6] because when I was talking to other players, I could see that when I said 'seven-string', they got stuck on that information and I had to qualify what I'd done by saying, 'But even without the seventh string, it's still a great instrument.' I thought we should offer people who may only want one luxury instrument the option of not having that seventh string.

"The six-string version is killer anyway because of all the other things about it. Y'know, the bracing, the shallower M-style body, the three-piece back, et cetera. The neck, as well, is not trying to be all things to all men. Which I find frustrating with some modern guitars because in trying to please everyone, sometimes the feel is just so generic. So I was very specific about the dimensions and absolutely adamant that we didn't have any satin finish nonsense on the back."

You're not a fan of satin necks?

"As I understand it, satin necks were a 90s idea. But I'm of the opinion: 'If it's too problematic moving your hand up and down a glossy neck, you're in the wrong job, mate.' I used to read that in the 80s with some metal players: 'Oh, I can't handle it when there's too much gloss on the neck.' The only person who's allowed to say that is Eddie Van Halen. I've got friends who have taken sandpaper to the neck because they can't handle the gloss. But it's like, 'Stop being a baby. Put the hours in and wear it down yourself.'"

How did you settle on the body shape?

"The seventh string was the first thing I thought of, and then the dimensions of the M-7 was the last remaining piece. I said to

“Without a pick, it really holds up. But then, if you hammer it like a rhythm guitar, it sounds like The Who”

In developing his signatures, Marr was after a specific body shape and depth: “I said to Martin, ‘Can I make the front like a D-28 and the back like a D-35: has anyone ever done that?’”

3. Johnny worked with Jen Tabor of Souldier to create this exclusive 70s-style strap with a peacock pattern and debossed signature

4. The M-7 offers a touch of that 12-string harmonic magic, without the excessive tuning requirements

PHOTOS BY ERIC DOWD COURTESY OF MARTIN

Martin, 'Can I make the front like a D-28 and the back like a D-35: has anyone ever done that?' What I love about both the six- and seven-string version is that the bottom is essentially the size of a dreadnought but the depth means that if you want to play unaccompanied arpeggios and do the West Coast thing – without a pick, just with fingers – it really holds up. But then, if you hammer it like a rhythm guitar, it sounds like The Who."

Martin acoustics have a reputation for mighty bottom-end.
"That's right. I've got a friend in a well-known band, and he's sometimes peeved me about my use of Martins because he says they have unnecessary bottom-end. My retort was always: 'Well, you need to learn to play properly using the lower strings and start writing songs in tunings.' Because he's a Hummingbird and J-200 freak.

"But with my signature models, I'm trying to do that thing where they sound good recorded and they will take that really punchy rhythm playing. That's why I say it sounds like The Who. I think a bit of that is down to them being slightly shallower than the dreadnought, but they still have the rest of those dreadnought dimensions."

Do you find the M-6 and M-7 more comfortable than a dreadnought?
"Well, that was an unexpected bonus. As soon as it arrived, I went, 'Oh, hello – I could get used to this.' I've been touring with my seven-string and I don't miss that extra depth of a dreadnought, particularly on stage when you're going through a PA. You absolutely don't need it. As for the electronics [LR Baggs Anthem], I just went with Martin's advice. I've used them live and they sound great."

> **"I don't miss that extra depth of a dreadnought, particularly on stage through a PA"**

The new guitar sounds like it would really sing with a capo.
"I almost use capos too much. I'm trying to wean myself off 'em somewhat. I'm not joking. Just Google pictures of me: more often than not I'm using capos, and so many times on the 4th fret. For some reason, guitars like capos on the 4th fret; they sing out really well. In my live show, I move capos around all the time. That's something I learnt really young, when I was copying players like Stephen Stills, and what Bert, Martin Carthy and John Renbourn were doing. These days, on electric, I use G7th capos, but the last few I've been using [on acoustic] were actually my old Jim Dunlops, believe it or not. They're fantastic."

The spruce top and rosewood body have a lovely warm finish.
"I was really pleased to get the top colour in a shade that I consider to be 'classic'. Because there's a lot of acoustics that come out, for some reason, in a shade I don't like. Martin were great about it. I drove them a bit mad about the shade. And I had the option to relic it, but I wasn't going to do that, given my feelings about the neck. The thing about old guitars is that people beat them up through playing them, and that's what I wanted. If someone buys one of my guitars, one day it will be old. It doesn't need to come out of the box looking pseudo-old."

Finally, what inspired the retro-cool Souldier strap supplied with the new guitars?
"I've had all kinds of different designs with Souldier, and when I came to do these acoustics I wanted a classic colour scheme, and Jen [Tabor, founder] gave me a few options. Because I was a kid in the 70s, I was seeing a lot of acoustic players, so I went for a sort of 70s style. I get quite obsessive about these things, so I tried out way more designs than I ought to have, but I got there in the end. I remember when you couldn't get decent straps – I call them the dark times. In the 80s, when I was coming up in the Smiths days… Oh, man. I'd go into guitar shops and could I find one without skull and crossbones on? No. So it's definitely progress!"

Johnny Marr's M-6 and M-7 are available now from Martin Guitars. See the website for more information www.martinguitar.com

STUDIO QUALITY SOUND,
ANYWHERE YOU GO
16/24bit Fixed
32bit Float
MIC
ZOOM
00:00:00/07:39:32
XY
MIX
1
2
H5studio
Handy Recorder

ZOOM H5 STUDIO – YOUR BEST WORK STARTS HERE

The H5 studio was made for seamless and professional production. Creators can record flawless audio with stunningly clear microphones, studio-grade preamps and 32-bitfloat recording.

With the largest mics ever on a handy recorder the 19.4mm microphones capture audio with incredible frequency response, 140 dB maxSPL and an expansive dynamic range. Their increased size captures recordings with unmatched depth and clarity.

F-Series power now in your hands the H5 studio features our F-series preamps, giving your audio unmatched clarity. With dual AD converters and 32-bit float it delivers an impressive 132 dB dynamic range, capturing everything without noise or distortion.

ZOOM | We're For Creators®

Proudly distributed by Dynamic Music | www.dynamicmusic.com.au | +61 2 9939 1299 | @zoomaustralia

Scan to find a retailer

A SMASHING PUMPKIN

Kiki Wong on her life, gear and technique before and since teaming up with Smashing Pumpkins' Billy Corgan and James Iha in the spring of '24

BY **ANDREW DALY**

BEFORE SECURING THE gig as a touring guitarist with the Smashing Pumpkins, Kiki Wong had all but given up her dreams of large-scale success with a big-time act. That's not to say she wasn't capable; one glance at her millions-strong social media following showed she was certainly up to the task.

But an unruly music business and a devotion to family led her elsewhere. Outsiders called Wong a "social media shredder" and a "bedroom guitarist." Forget that she was riffing heavy on gnarly guitars in front of millions of viewers; to her detractors, it wasn't enough.

"My biggest advice is to accept failure like it is your best friend," Wong tells us. "Some of your biggest failures will happen early on when you're just getting started or when you're in a vulnerable position. Failure sucks. It hurts. It stays with you. And you certainly don't want to do it again."

Wong processed the hurt and vulnerability the music biz slung at her and saw her star rise. So high, in fact, that when Billy Corgan held an open audition in the winter of 2024 to replace the departed Jeff Schroeder, he chose Wong for the gig over another 9,999 (seriously) applicants.

Since signing with the Pumpkins, things have gone well for Wong. She's toured the world with Corgan and James Iha in support of the Pumpkins' latest record, 2024's *Aghori Mhori Mei*, and fans have been welcoming, even if some felt her to be "too metal." Such is life as a Pumpkin; you can't make anyone entirely happy.

"Joining the Smashing Pumpkins has helped me become a whole lot more well-rounded player, adding a little alternative music to my style as well, and I am so grateful for that," she says.

As for what she'd be doing if she didn't beat out those other 9,999 applicants, Wong says: "Honestly, I'd probably be doing more TikTok and Instagram Reel videos at home and being a mom, which wouldn't be a terrible life. However, I'm so grateful for having the second chance at fulfilling my dreams and exceeding my expectations of how far I could take my music career. It has been the best thing that's happened to me, besides, of course, my son being born."

From indie metal hopeful to social media guitar star to gracing the grandest stages worldwide playing iconic hits of the Nineties alongside one of rock's most seminal characters (here's looking at you, Billy), Wong's journey is an inspiration for anyone hoping to "make it." She's seen the bottom, which prepared her for the top.

"If you accept failure as a place for growth, the sky is truly the limit," Wong says. "I have 1,000 percent failed more than I've succeeded, and I truly believe that's why I'm here today. It allows you to see where you can improve in whatever it is you want to achieve and check your ego if things are going almost too well. That advice still stands to this day."

JOE OKPAKO/WIREIMAGE

You've been playing with the Pumpkins since the spring of 2024. How has that changed your life?
It honestly has been one of the best things I could ever ask for. It still shocks me that I was literally living in the desert — between the masses of desert, almost in the middle of nowhere — and catapulting into a world tour with one of the most influential Nineties rock 'n' roll bands. I'm forever grateful. Most importantly, it has allowed me to improve as a musician and expand my musical understanding.

Does that mean you're a different player now than you were then?
Absolutely. I have a lot to attribute to Billy. He's developed a distinct playing style that when you hear it, you go, "That's Billy Corgan," which I think is what we all strive to do as musicians. Learning his style was hard, but it helped me play with more feel and vibe. The first week of rehearsal was like a musical boot camp that taught me more than 20 years of playing by myself did.

You were mostly known as a metal player going into the Pumpkins gig. Do you still consider yourself that type of player?
I honestly just wanted to play what I liked the most — which is metal — my whole life. It helped keep me super-focused and interested in playing and practicing. However, it did end up making me a one-trick pony, always blasting the dirtiest distortion and not really having a whole lot of dynamics to my playing.

> **"The first week of rehearsal was like a musical boot camp that taught me more than 20 years of playing by myself"**

How has your presence in the Smashing Pumpkins most impacted the live show?
I was worried at first how well I was going to mesh with the band since I felt like such a noob going into the project. However, the band was so patient and welcoming that it made it easy to find my place. I always say, "I might not be the best guitar player out there. In fact, I know I'm not the best guitar player out there. But I guarantee I'll always give one hell of a show." And the Pumpkins have given me space to be myself on stage, which has been so honorable.

What song was the most challenging to learn, and what songs still give you fits?
"Thru the Eyes of Ruby" [*from 1995's* Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness] was one of the more difficult songs for me to learn since there were so many effects and different harmonizing parts. The tricky part about Smashing Pumpkins' music is the arrangements. It's orchestrated well and almost counterintuitively while still maintaining musical sensibility and mainstream appeal. It's really quite genius, but also hard to learn — and it sounds insane, but sometimes the easiest songs still get me nervous. Like, one note hanging can be more nerve-racking than a whole solo because if you miss that note, you screwed up the whole part. That's why "Today" [*from 1993's* Siamese Dream] sometimes gets me nervous. [*Laughs*]

Kiki Wong and bassist Jack Bates in action with the Smashing Pumpkins in 2024

NADINE JOY

What have you learned about Billy and James as guitar players that you didn't know before?
One thing I love about Billy's playing is that he plays his own style. When you hear it, you know that's Billy Corgan. He also taught me how to use my thumb more, which is very Hendrix, and also hearing intervals of fourths in his playing is really amazing. He's an incredible shredder and has a breadth of guitar understanding that could honestly blow away many modern guitarists. James is so inspirational because he understands music and sound as a design, which adds such a cool dynamic to the songs. He's developed a style that gives the music a vibe and lifts the air of the songs. It's truly incredible, almost like a foley room artist for theatrical films. I have so much respect for him, and it has influenced me to want to use more effects in my playing as well.

What is the secret sauce to the Pumpkins guitar sound, and how do you fit into that?
With Smashing Pumpkins, it's all about feel, vibe and following the "Pumpkins pocket." Everything we play is by vibing and following each other. What you hear is exactly what is being played, and the ebb and flow of the pocket is what makes it truly an unmatched experience live.

Securing the gig the way you did gave hope to players that they could reach their dreams, too. Have you considered the impact and importance this has had on young players — especially young women — who want to break through?
One of my main goals in starting my TikTok account playing Daily Metal Guitar Riffs was to inspire young people to pick up a guitar again. At the time, some of our favorite guitar brands were filing for bankruptcy, and rock was "phasing out." My intention was to do the best I could to rekindle that. Now, joining the Smashing Pumpkins through the audition process has allowed me to show that hard work does pay off. It truly fills my heart knowing that people have been inspired by my story. It just helps strengthen my original goal: keeping the metal and rock 'n' roll alive!

As you've alluded, you've done an amazing job of promoting yourself on social media. Do you think you would you be here without that?
Social media is an extremely tricky topic. A lot of times, musicians don't want to take part in social media trends, and understandably so, because it can make

[from left]
Wong, Bates and
Billy Corgan perform in
Lucca, Italy, July 6, 2024

FRANCESCO PRANDONI/GETTY IMAGES

you feel like you're selling yourself. But if you embrace that as a tool for you to get yourself out there and connect with other people, it can be the best thing that will catapult your music career. At the end of the day, people want to feel connected with something or someone. Social media is a place where that can happen. Without building a following, there is no way I would have been able to connect with so many incredible fans and musicians, as well as have the opportunity to be a part of the Smashing Pumpkins.

Did you ever feel overlooked or cast aside as just a "social media" or "bedroom" guitar player? Do you feel people take you more seriously now?

It's tough because I have TikTok and Instagram to thank for my "claim to fame," so to speak. But at the same time, I put in the hours and work playing in bands and writing our own music. I've played hundreds of shows before I even became popular on social media, good and bad. Though there is absolutely nothing wrong with social media influencers and bedroom guitarists, it wasn't all that was in my repertoire; the positive side is it sheds good light on the fact that dreams can come true for those who are playing at home.

Can you elaborate on how your thoughts on gear have changed since getting the Pumpkins gig?

Distortion, distortion, gain and more gain were my digs before I joined the Smashing Pumpkins. However, they've introduced me to a whole new world with pedals. Really dialing in [*my*] tone and voicing has been an interesting journey for me musically. I'm grateful to Billy and James for being such huge mentors in that space.

> "I might not be the best guitar player out there. I know I'm not. But I guarantee I'll always give one hell of a show..."

Are there any downsides to living life on larger stages? If so, would you trade it?

It's hard to call any of it a downside, to be honest. I've done so many makeshift tours in the back of vans, asking venues for food since we didn't have the cash to get it on tour when our wallets were stolen; the whole nine yards. The only thing I would say is that when you play to huge audiences, it's harder to connect with people since they are so far away, especially in stadiums. I do miss occasional eye contact and shoutouts, but it still happens; [*you*'ve] just gotta squint more. [*Laughs*]

At one point, you left music behind, but you're back now. Beyond the Pumpkins, what does the future hold for you?

I gave up on touring with any big act after having my son because I wanted to dedicate my efforts to being a mother. But since the Smashing Pumpkins are so family-oriented and understanding, it's been a dream come true to be able to perform and be a mother with the help and support of my boyfriend and my parents at home. I'm able to continue my musical dreams, and for that, I will forever be grateful.

RADIOHEAD

Martin Cooper checks out the sound of an era-defining band from Oxford, and guitarists Thom Yorke, Jonny Greenwood, and Ed O'Brien.

Jonny Greenwood flailing on his stripped-body Les Paul Standard

ABILITY RATING

★★★☆☆ **Moderate**

Info	**Will improve your**
Key: G Minor	✔ Playing with fingers
Tempo: 87bpm	✔ Tremolo-picked lead
https://bit.ly/3uvNmB6	✔ Atmoshere and dynamics

Radiohead made a huge impact on music in the latter years of the 20th century and into the 21st. Along with bands like U2 and REM, they recorded some of the most classic songs in recent memory.

Formed in Oxfordshire, England in the mid 1980s by school friends Thom Yorke on lead vocals and guitar, Ed O'Brien and Jonny Greenwood also on guitar, Jonny's brother Colin on bass, and drummer Philip Selway. They found solace and inspiration in their school years from music, and would rehearse on Fridays which led to the formation of the band called On A Friday.

Their musical influences are wide ranging, and include rock, jazz and avant garde film music. Yorke's influences range from Queen to Siouxsie Sioux, while the Greenwood brothers grew up listening mostly to Classical music.

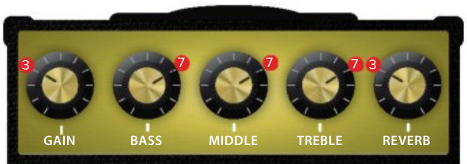
After attracting record label interest, they signed with EMI in 1991 and, at the label's request, changed the band name. Radiohead is taken from the Talking Heads song of the same name. The debut album Pablo Honey was released to minimal critical acclaim at the time and the first single, Creep, was a concern for BBC for being downbeat and (originally) containing the f word. However, the group picked up traction with their live gigs and some commercial exposure on the radio, also helped by becoming the opening act for bands such as Tears For Fears.

They hit the big time in 1994 with the John Leckie produced album The Bends, which was followed by one of the greatest records of the 20th century, OK Computer. Like many of the great groups, Radiohead have constantly pushed musical boundaries and anyone wanting OK Computer Part II is still waiting for it. Their style has often incorporated songs built around fuzz-driven guitar, but in the blink of an eye those are replaced by synths and electronic arrangements, in some ways making the band sound unrecognisable from one album to the next. Yet somehow Radiohead always retains their unique musical identity.

Our track this month is built around a clean guitar part played with finger and thumb, which outlines the chord changes and harmony before giving way to fuzz-driven barre-chord mayhem. The solo follows the chord tones and uses tremolo picking for the lead lines. We're in the key of G Minor (G-A-B♭-C-D-E♭-F), with extra C Major (C-E-G) and A Major (A-C#-E) chords adding tension and the occasional 'awkward' sound of the track.

> "The Bends was followed by one of the most influential albums of the 20th century, OK Computer."

Check out the Playing Tips and Get The Tone boxes for more info, and look at the video courtesy of Guitar World to see the specific playing articulations. Good luck!



Get the Tone

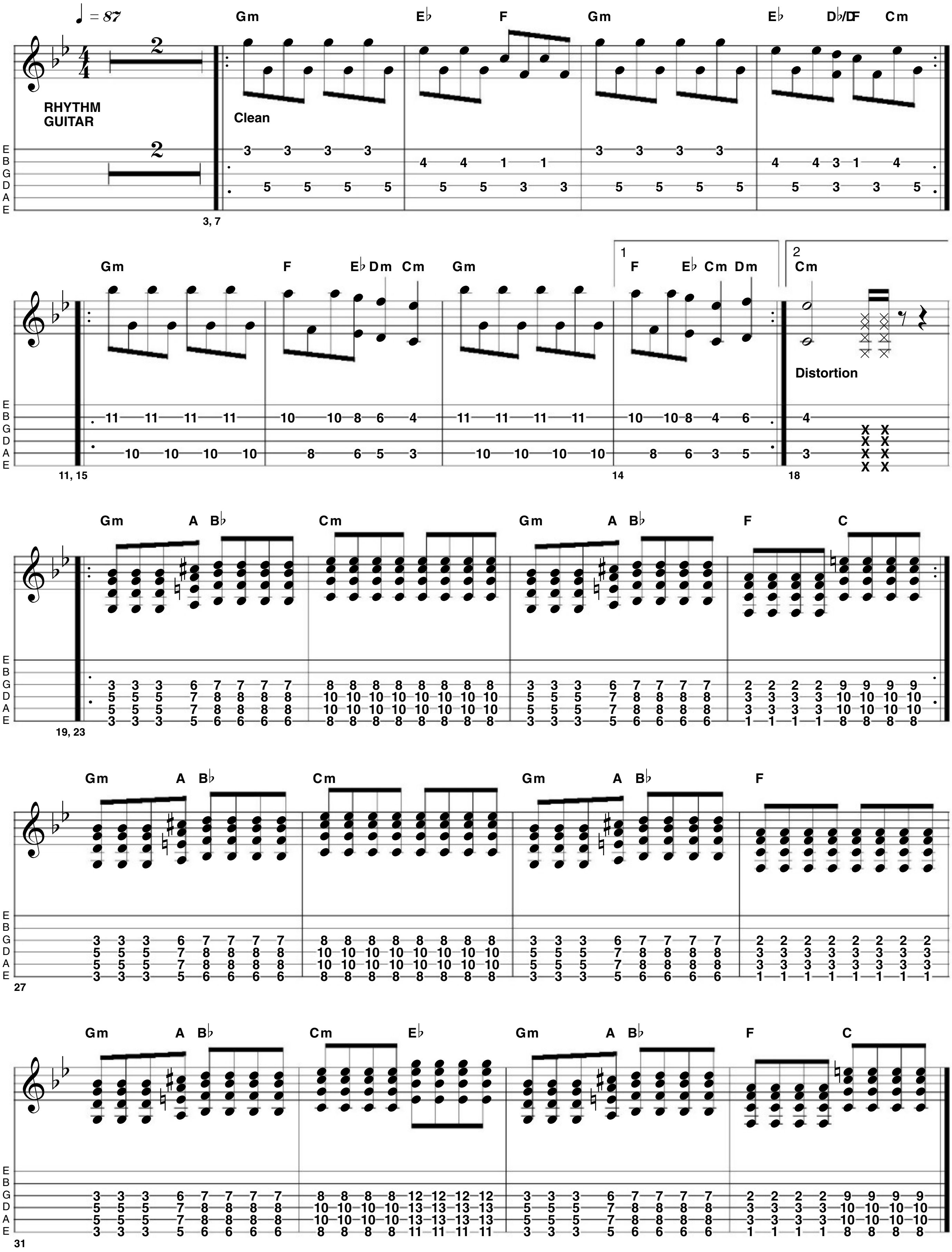
It's the sound of Fender guitars, Vox and Fender amps, and pedals like Marshall's Shredmaster. Basically, a nice chime to the clean sound, and distorted fuzz tones will get you in the right ballpark. The tone on the track is the same on the amp for the clean and overdriven parts, but there is a Rat style fuzz plugin added for the overdriven parts. Add effects to taste.

TRACK RECORD Debut Pablo Honey from 1993 contained the epic Creep, while classic album The Bends from 1995 features High And Dry, Fake Plastic Trees and Just, while the era-defining follow-up OK Computer from 1997 included Paranoid Android and No Surprises. Kid A from 2000 was a total change in musical direction for the band, and featured the hypnotic sound of Everything In Its Right Place.

RICK KERN/GETTY IMAGES

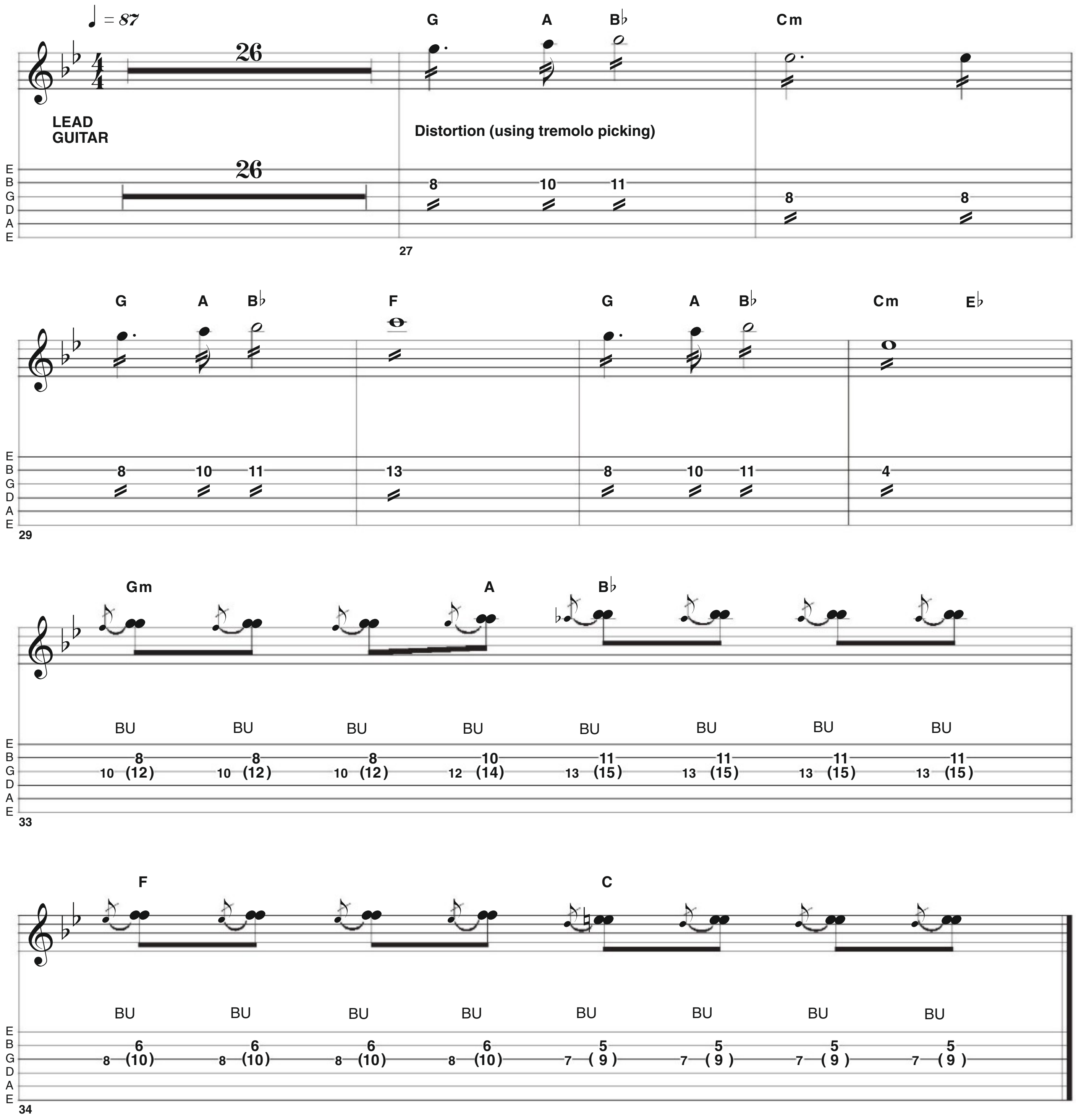
PLAYING NOTES RHYTHM

The main clean rhythm guitar part is played with the second finger and thumb throughout the first 18 bars. It'll probably work best to use this finger for the higher notes and the thumb for the lower notes each time. From there onwards it's played with a pick, starting with the muted fuzz notes in bar 18.


♩ = 87
RHYTHM GUITAR
Clean
Gm
E♭
F
Gm
E♭
D♭/D♭F
Cm
3, 7
Gm
F
E♭ Dm Cm
Gm
1
F
E♭ Cm Dm
2
Cm
Distortion
11, 15
14
18
Gm
A B♭
Cm
Gm
A B♭
F
C
19, 23
Gm
A B♭
Cm
Gm
A B♭
F
27
Gm
A B♭
Cm
E♭
Gm
A B♭
F
C
31
E B G D A E

PLAYING NOTES LEAD

The tremolo-picked lead lines involve picking as fast as possible on each note. The string bends (not tremolo picked) in the final bars 33-34 are deliberately on the loose side since it's mainly attitude to aim for here. That said, still pay attention to your string bending intonation so the unison's aren't overbent.


♩ = 87
26
LEAD GUITAR
Distortion (using tremolo picking)
G
A
B♭
Cm
F
E♭
Gm
C
BU
E B G D A E
27
29
33
34
8 10 11 8 8
8 10 11 13 8 10 11 4
10 8 (12) 10 8 (12) 10 8 (12) 12 10 (14) 13 11 (15) 13 11 (15) 13 11 (15) 13 11 (15)
8 6 (10) 8 6 (10) 8 6 (10) 8 6 (10) 7 5 (9) 7 5 (9) 7 5 (9) 7 5 (9)

guitar
WE'LL MAKE YOU A BETTER PLAYER!

SPEED. POWER. PRECISION.

Jackson®

AMERICAN SERIES

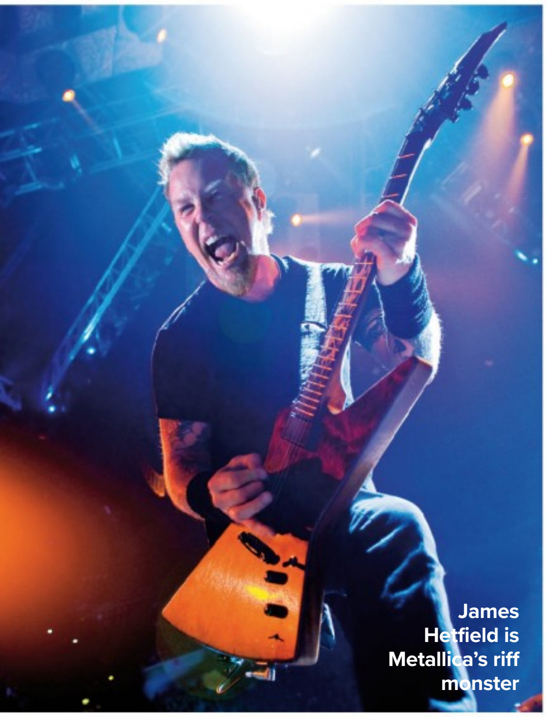
SOLOIST SL2DX

Learn more about the complete American Series collection at JacksonGuitars.com

©2025 Jackson/Charvel Manufacturing, Inc. All rights reserved.

METALLICA STYLE

This month **Jamie Hunt** brings you a brace of thrash metal riffs inspired by the ferocious palm-muted down picking of rhythm guitarist James Hetfield.



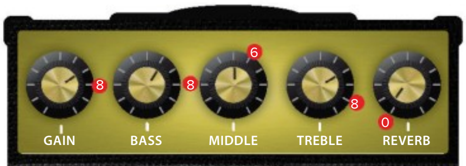
James Hetfield is Metallica's riff monster

Since the release of the Kill Em' All album in 1983, Metallica have established themselves as the undeniable architects of the thrash metal subgenre. Metallica's music has real purpose and authority, and is held in high esteem by many music greats outside the world of metal. The unrelenting pace and ferocity of James Hetfield and Kirk Hammett's riffs took the metal world by storm, and paved the way for generations to come. Much of Metallica s intensity comes from the speed and accuracy of James Hetfield's palm-muted down picking. This provides the aggression and attack that drives the band's songs along. Kirk Hammett and James Hetfield often make effective use of chromatic movement, too, which brings extra drama and tension to their single-note riffs and chord sequences. Be sure to check out the video and audio supplements on Guitar World (link in header!).

ABILITY RATING

★★★★☆ **Moderate / Advanced**

Info	**Will improve your**
Key: *Various*	✓ *Down picking*
Tempo: *Various*	✓ *Palm muting*
https://bit.ly/3uvNmB6	✓ *Chromatic powerchord slides*



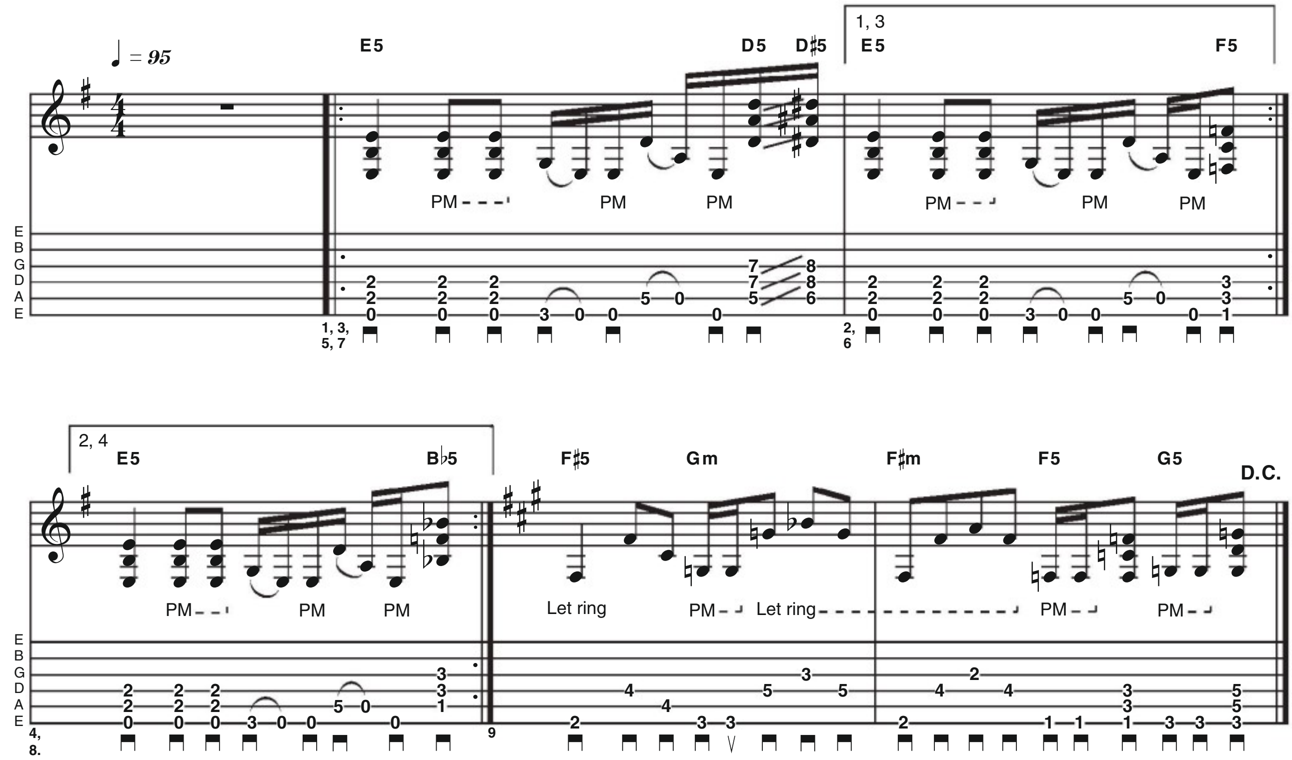
Get the Tone

Use your bridge pickup and a healthy amount of gain. However, instead of scooping the middle on your amp and losing the weight of your sound, keep the middle at 12 o'clock and then boost the bass and treble. When palm muting, rest your hand where the string meets the bridge, as this will bring chunk to your sound while retaining the pitch definition.

JESSE WILD

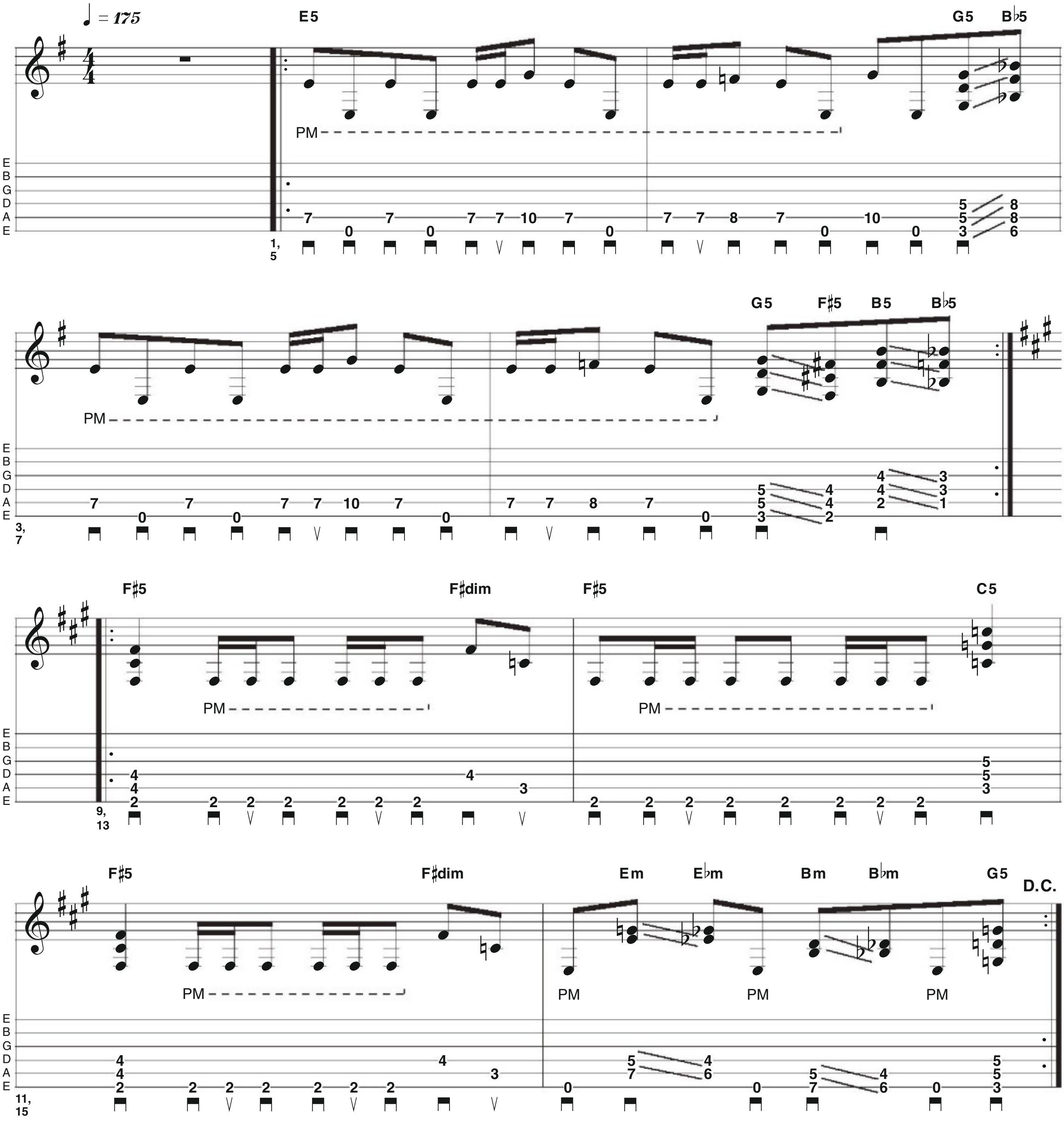
STYLE STUDY 1

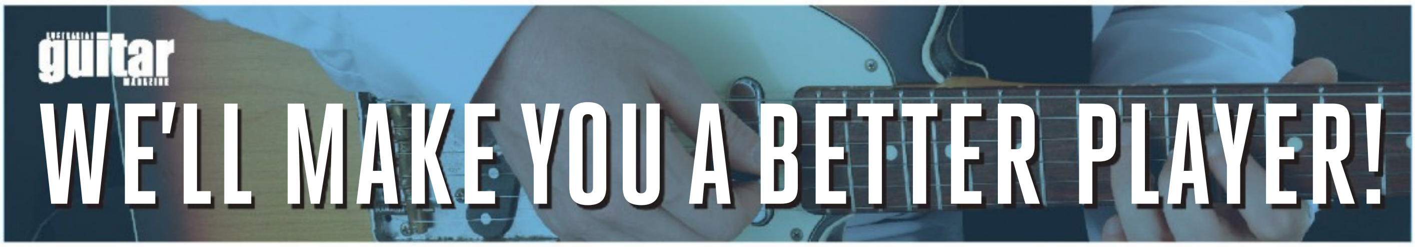
We open with a stomping groove in E Minor. Palm muting brings weight and shape in contrast to the melodic pull-offs. The second section features arpeggiated chords that move chromatically for a change in pace and some harmonic tension before resolving back to the opening riff.



STYLE STUDY 2

This study begins with fast-paced downstrokes and strategic upstrokes for the 16th notes within the sequence. Use palm muting to again focus the rhythms and contrast against the sliding power chords during phrase endings. The second section maintains the palm muting; however, the opening and closing notes of bars 5 -7 are unmuted. This helps to bring dynamics and overall shape when playing riffs at speed.


♩ = 175
E5
G5
B♭5
PM
E
B
G
D
A
E
1, 5
3, 7
G5
F♯5
B5
B♭5
F♯5
F♯dim
F♯5
C5
9, 13
F♯5
F♯dim
Em
E♭m
Bm
B♭m
G5
D.C.
11, 15


guitar
WE'LL MAKE YOU A BETTER PLAYER!

SPECIAL FEATURE

Country-Blues-Rock!

This issue **Andy Saphir** shows how mixing Major and Minor Pentatonic scales, adding extra notes and country guitar articulations, can build you a whole new lickbag.

ABILITY RATING **Moderate** ★★★☆☆

Info https://bit.ly/3uvNmB6
Key Various **Tempo** Various

Will improve your... ✓ Fretboard knowledge
✓ Chord/scale theory ✓ Country-blues vocabulary

In this feature we're going to look at how to get some country-blues flavour into your playing. Listening to iconic country-rock bands such as The Allman Brothers, The Flying Burrito Brothers and Eagles, legendary players like Joe Walsh, Don Felder, Dickey Betts, Clarence White, Glen Campbell, Albert Lee and Ray Flacke, and more recently Brent Mason, Vince Gill, Keith Urban and Tom Bukovac, will give you an idea of how these guitarists combine classic blues sounds with a more country flavour.

If you're familiar with blues, you will doubtless be aware of how we use the Minor Pentatonic scale (R-♭3-4-5-♭7) as a basis for much of the classic vocabulary, but when we play country music, much of our vocabulary comes from the Major Pentatonic scale (R-2-3-5-6). This is because so many country songs are based firmly in a Major tonality, so the notes that make up a Major chord (R-3-5) are represented in the scale. Playing licks from this scale will give a prettier, happier sound, and when we incorporate stylistic techniques such as pedal steel-style string bends, double-stops etc, we going to start to sound 'country'.

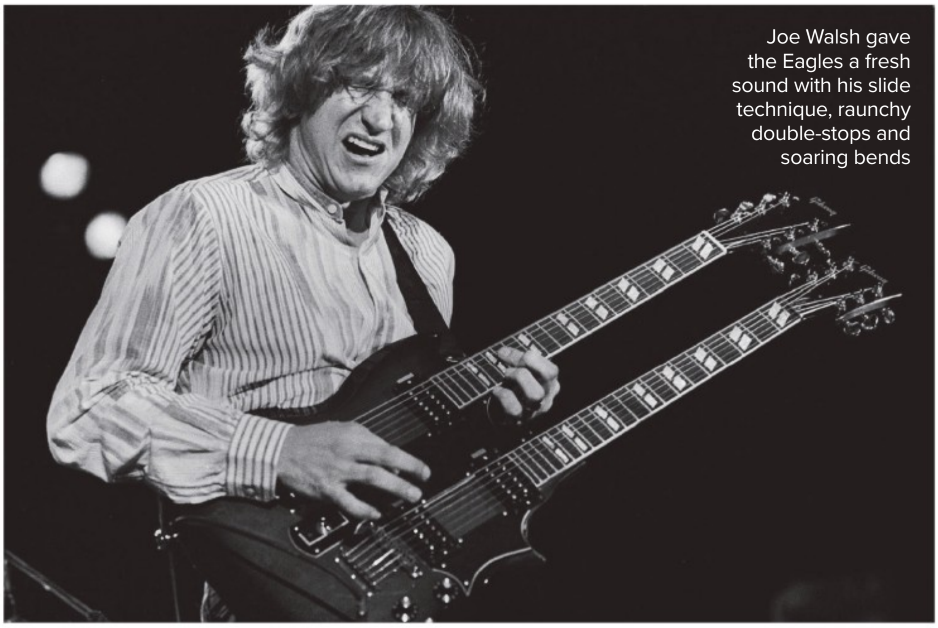
Sometimes though, that overtly happy sound can be too much, or not ideal, especially when we want to sound a bit more bluesy or rocky, so in these instances we need to create licks and phrases that bounce between Major and Minor Pentatonic scales and ones that mix notes from both of them in one phrase. Doing this well will give us that country sound and approach but mixed with blues - the best of both worlds!

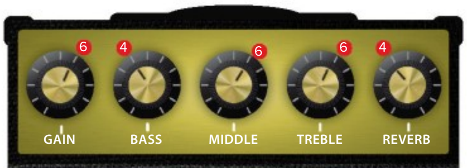
If you look at both of these scales combined into one, you get the following notes: R-2-♭3-3-4-5-6-♭7, which is a hybrid scale of Minor and Major Pentatonic. Furthermore, if you add the ♭5th interval that we find in the Minor Blues scale (R-♭3-4-♭5-5-♭7), you incorporate an even more bluesy element. Additionally, if you remove the ♭3 from the hybrid scale, you get the notes of the Mixolydian mode (R-2-3-4-5-6-♭7).

All of these scale-based approaches can give us a seemingly endless combination of potential note choices. But looking at it this way can also seem rather daunting. So a good way to approach it is by doing a lot of listening and learning of solos, licks and lines that incorporate these various combinations, analysing the origin of the various notes along the way. It won't take long for you to start playing this way instinctively, and this in turn will help you to develop your own ideas.

To this end we have five exercises which layer the different Major intervals (2nd-3rd-6th) onto Minor Pentatonic phrases, and also mix Major Pentatonic and Mixolydian tonalities to give you an idea of how these note combinations create different sounds.In addition, there are two mini pieces to learn, one mid-paced and the other more uptempo, to which I've given a country flavoured blues-rock vibe.

Take your time with the examples, absorb the 'sound' of the licks, hear where the key notes of R-3-5-♭7 are, note how the phrases are structured, and the various country-style articulations employed to create them. Do so and pretty soon you'll be developing your own country-blues vocabulary. Check out the link in the header for video and audio supplements, and have fun!

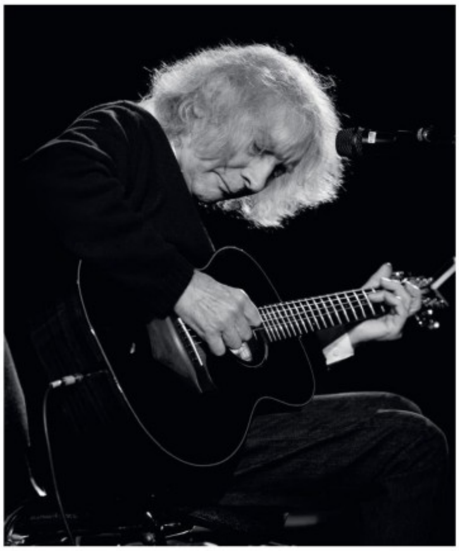

Joe Walsh gave the Eagles a fresh sound with his slide technique, raunchy double-stops and soaring bends

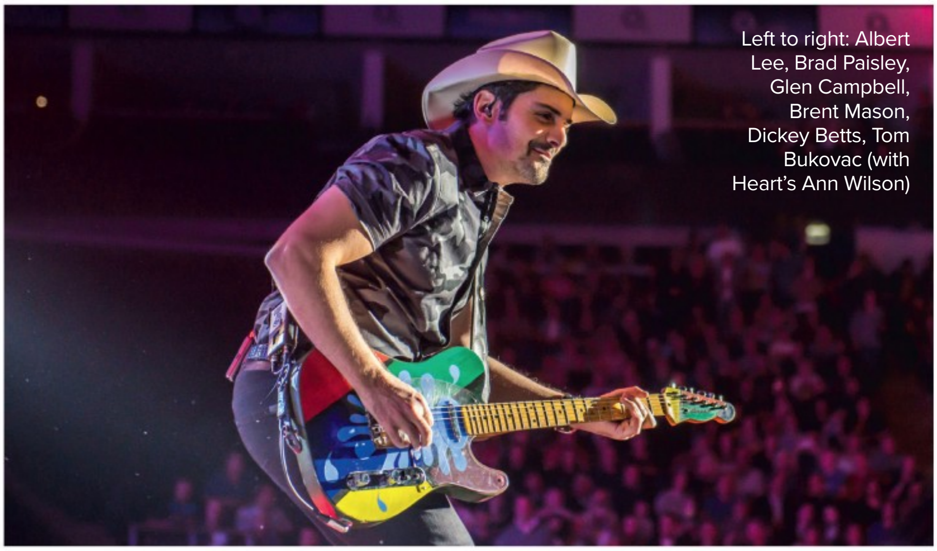


Get the Tone

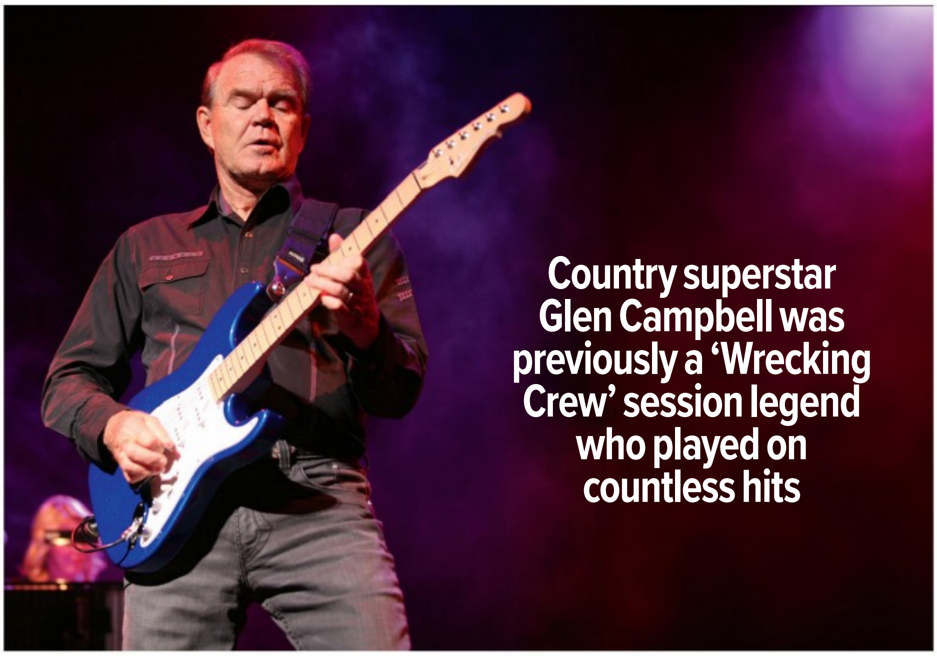
A single-coil guitar will give a cleaner, more traditional country approach, with perhaps a little compression to add sustain and smooth out the sound. A humbucking guitar is better for heavier country-rock, where more overdrive is required. A fixed bridge guitar will avoid tuning discrepancies when playing two strings where one is held bent. Add reverb or delay.

PAUL NATKIN / GETTY IMAGES





Left to right: Albert Lee, Brad Paisley, Glen Campbell, Brent Mason, Dickey Betts, Tom Bukovac (with Heart's Ann Wilson)



Country superstar Glen Campbell was previously a 'Wrecking Crew' session legend who played on countless hits

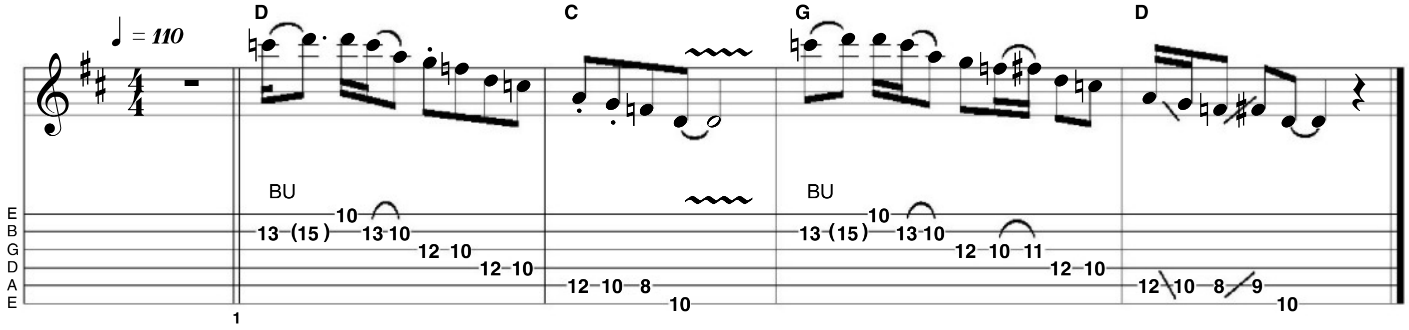
ROBIN LITTLE / RICHARD ECCLESTONE / ROBERTA PARKIN / REDFERNS / RICK DIAMOND / SCOTT DUDELSON / GETTY IMAGES

TRACK RECORD Dickey Betts' solo on Ramblin Man (The Allman Brothers Live At University Of Florida) is a great example of country-blues improvisation, while Albert Lee displays his virtuosity on Born To Run (Heartbreak Hill). Joe Walsh on Life's Been Good (Eagles Live 1980) illustrates his high-energy approach, and Brent Mason's instrumental Hot Wired shows country-blues in a super fast setting!

»

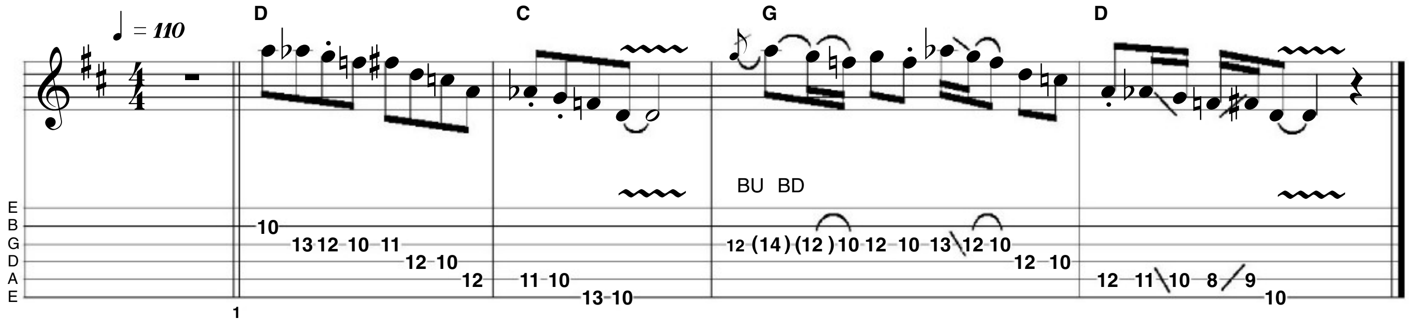
EXERCISE 1

[Bars 1-2] This is a standard blues lick based on D Minor Pentatonic scale (D-F-G-A-C). Make sure the tone interval bend on the second string is accurately pitched. **[Bars 3-4]** This lick is similar to the previous one, except that it introduces the Major 3rd (F#) note (11th fret, third string and 9th fret, fifth string).



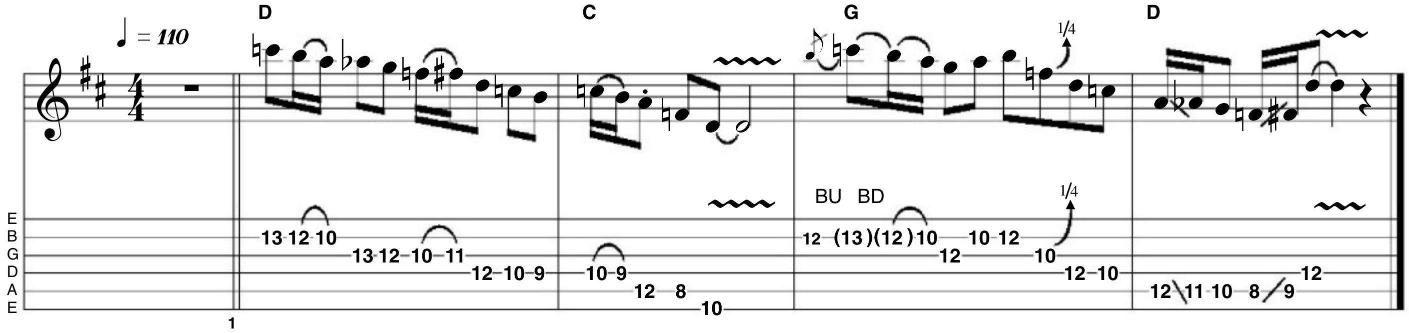
EXERCISE 2

[Bars 1-2] This country-blues lick adds the Major 3rd but also the ♭5th 'blue note' (13th fret third string and 11th fret, fifth string) from the D Minor Blues scale (D-F-G-A♭-A-C), which adds a more bluesy sound. **[Bars 3-4]** Make sure the third-string tone bend on beat 1 is accurately pitched in order to appreciate the difference between this, and the subsequent ♭5th note on beat 3. Getting these articulations spot on is what country-blues playing is all about.



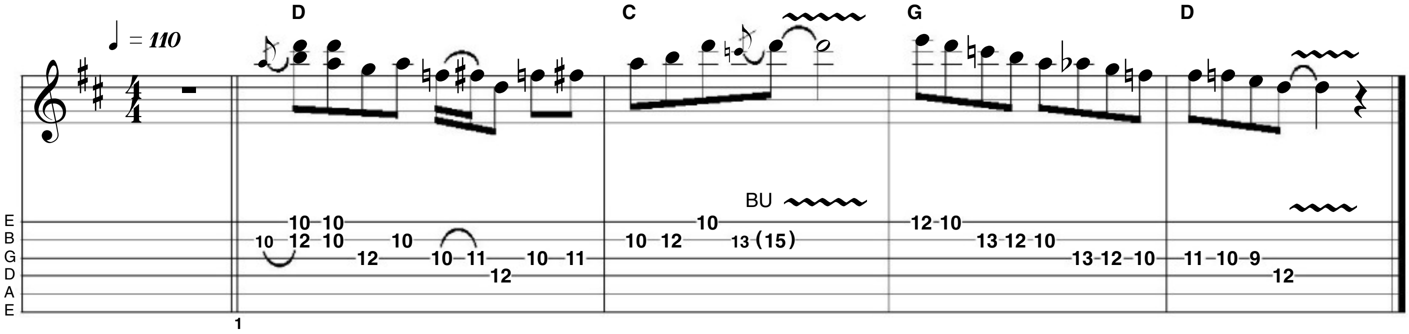
EXERCISE 3

These phrases add the Major 6th (B note in D) to the blues licks, in addition to the Major 3rd and ♭5th. The 3rd and 6th can be borrowed from the Major Pentatonic scale (R-2-3-5-6), but also from the Mixolydian mode (R-2-3-4-5-6-♭7), especially when used in conjunction with the ♭7th (C note in D).



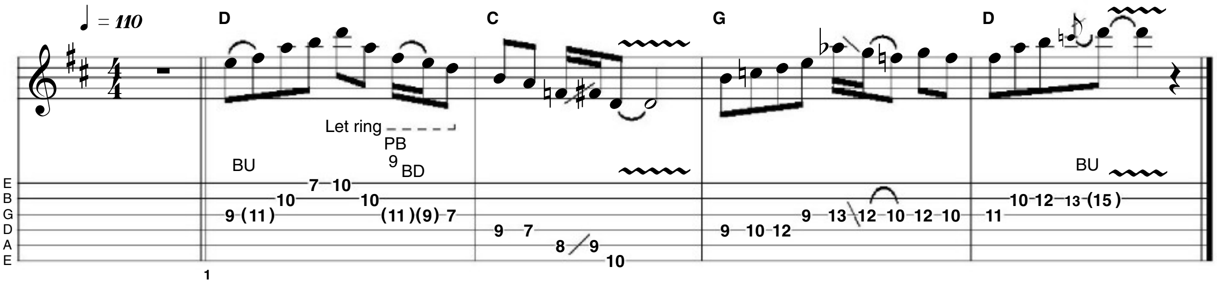
EXERCISE 4

[Bars 1-2] This lick has a more noticeable country flavour because it uses a D Major Pentatonic (D-E-F#-A-B) tonality. The ♭3rd to Major 3rd move gives a bluesy vibe. **[Bars 3 -4]** The scalic movement descending from the Major 2nd (E note) to the root note (D), going through the ♭7th (C) and 6th (B) to the 5th (A note) on beats 1 and 2, give a definite D Mixolydian mode (D-E-F#-G-A-B-C) sound. The following ♭5th and ♭3rd going to Major 3rd again keeps things bluesy.



EXERCISE 5

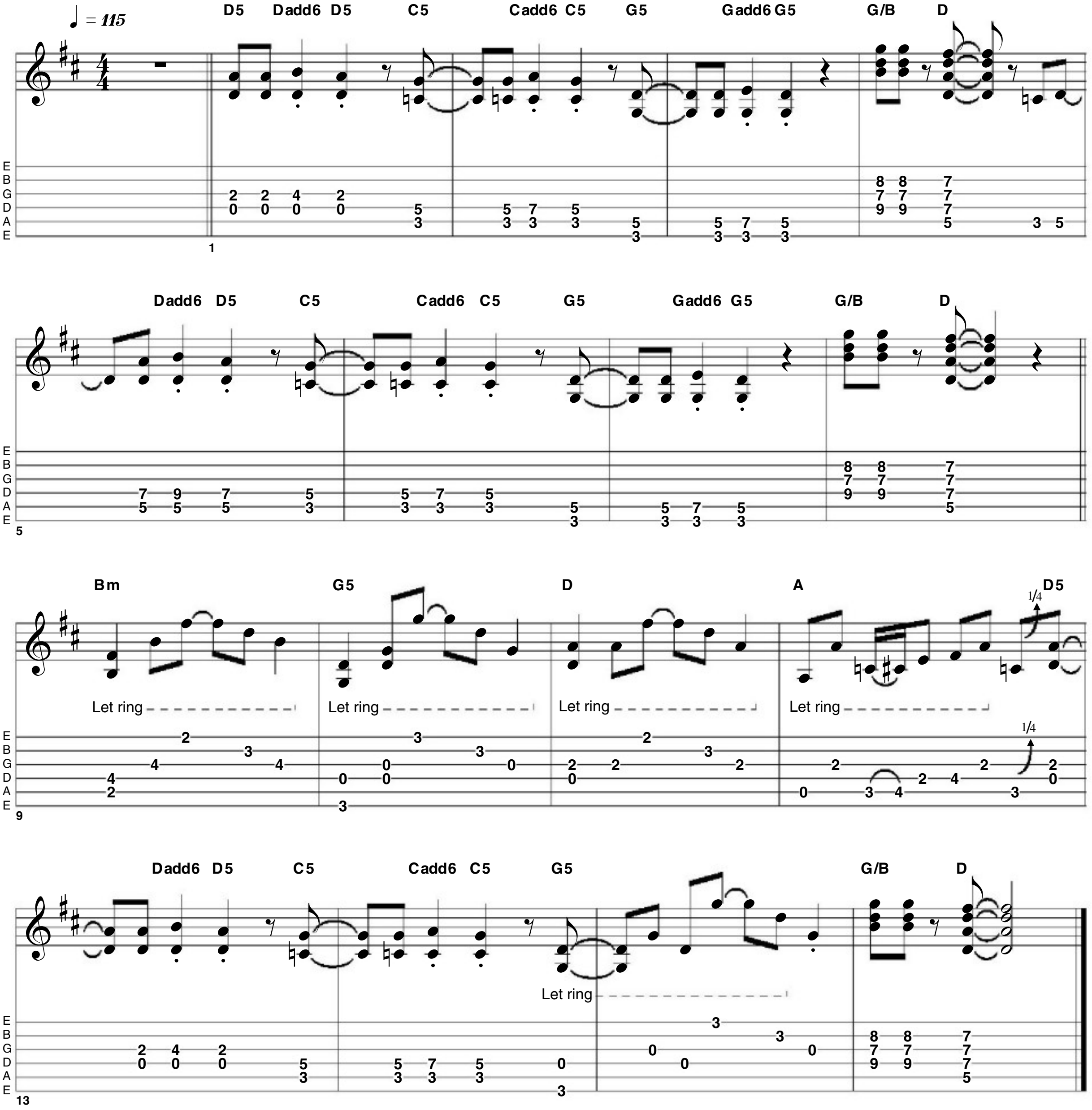
[Bars 1-2] This distinctly country sounding phrase uses a mainly D Major Pentatonic and mimicks the kind of lick of a pedal steel guitar could play. Use your fretting-hand's fourth finger on beat 3 to hold down the top two strings at the 10th fret, while the third finger pre-bends the third string a tone at the 9th fret, then lets it down. Let all three strings ring. **[Bars 3 -4]** This Mixolydian line with the familiar ♭5th and ♭3rd to Major 3rd move keeps the bluesy flavour.


♩ = 110
D
C
G
D
Let ring
PB
BU
BD
BU
E B G D A E
1

MIDTEMPO PIECE, RHYTHM

NOTES

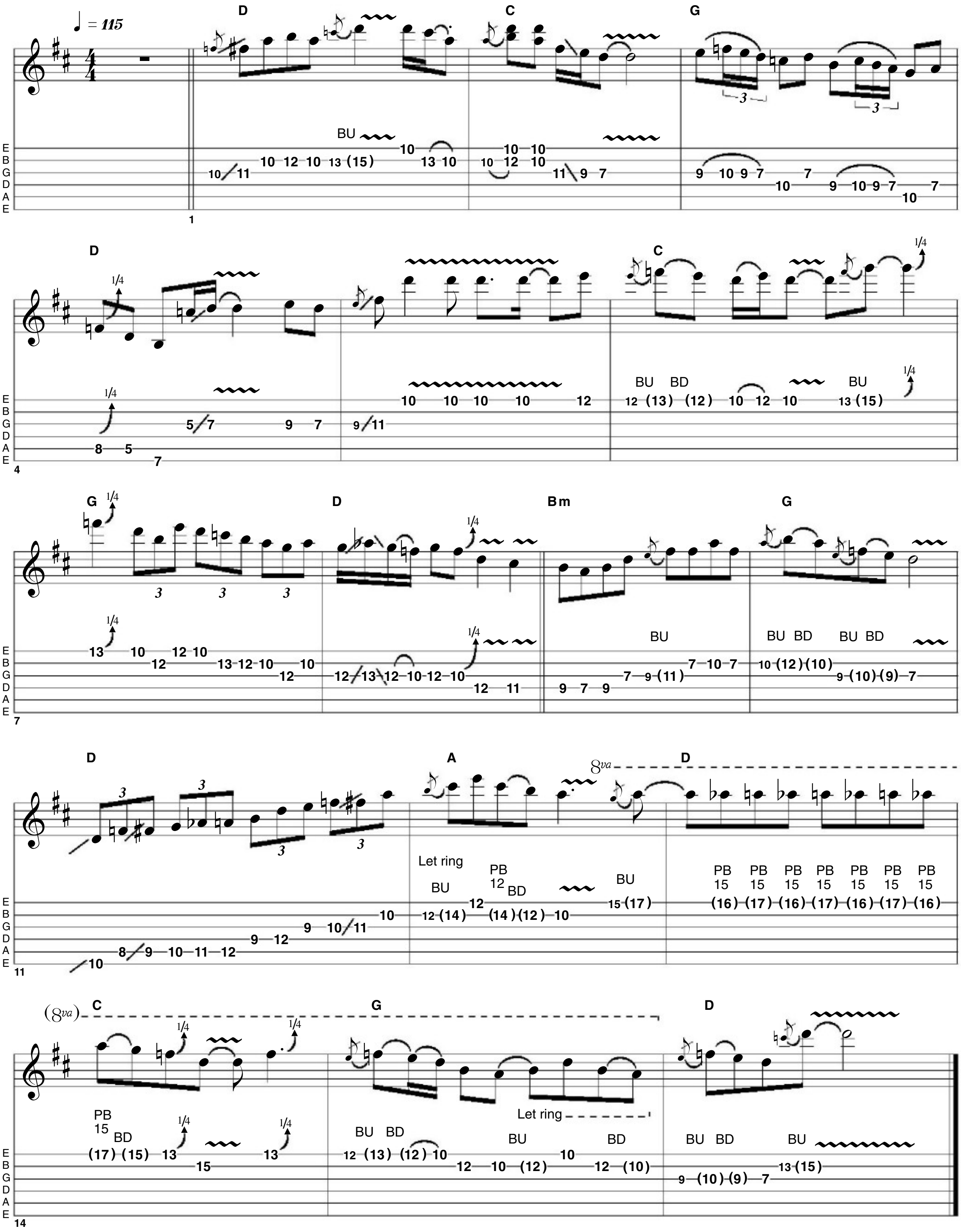
[Bars 1-8] Play the appropriate blues shuffle rhythm for each chord, and feel free to use fretting-hand muting to add percussive scratches and rhythmic interest, especially after the third beat of each bar. Aim to keep the timing locked in tight to maintain a good groove. **[Bars 9-16]** The technical approach changes here to one of arpeggiating chords. Again, keep the timing accurate and let the notes ring together to keep things flowing and fluent.


♩ = 115
D5
Dadd6
D5
C5
Cadd6
C5
G5
Gadd6
G5
G/B
D
Bm
G5
D
A
D5
1/4
Let ring
E B G D A E
1
5
9
13

MIDTEMPO PIECE, SOLO

NOTES

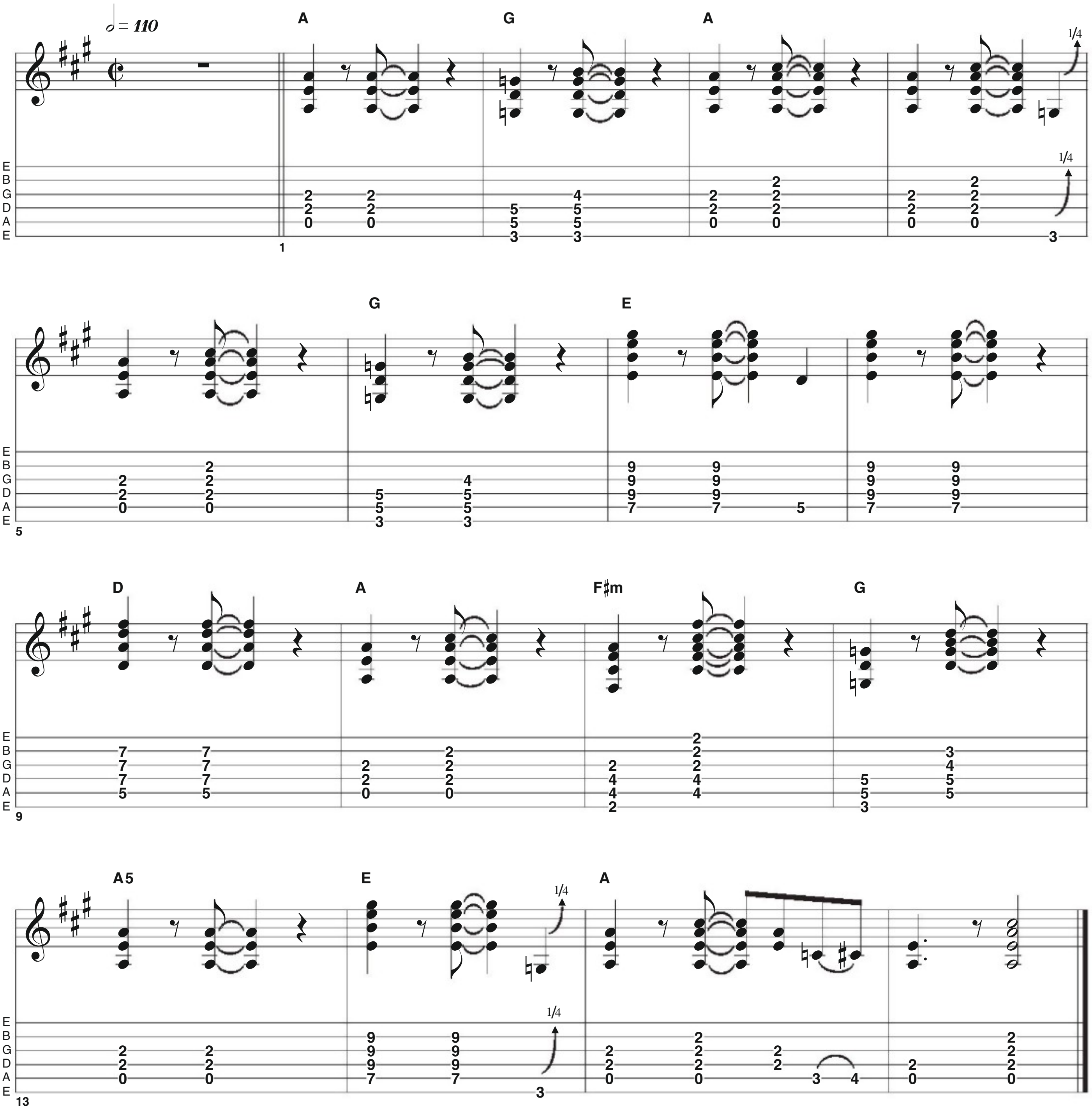
[Bars 1-8] These bars mix notes of D Minor Pentatonic (D-F-G-A-C) and D Mixolydian (D-E-F#-G-A-B-C) to create some tasty country-blues sounds. Note the quick use of the ♭5th (A♭) from the D Minor Blues scale (D-F-G-A♭-A-C) in bar 8. **[Bar 11]** This triplet phrase uses a chromatic line from a 'hybrid' scale of D Minor Blues and Mixolydian (R-2-♭3-3-4-♭5-5-6-♭7). The chromatic ascent from ♭3rd-5th is widely used in country, blues and jazz. **[Bar 12]** This country bend marks the A chord using A Major Pentatonic scale (A-B-C#-E-F#). **[Bar 13]** For this tricky lick, bend the first string ,15th fret (G) up a full tone to the 17th fret (A) but then re-pick it a semitone lower (A♭). This necessitates some very accurate pre-bending of the string, so ensure you listen carefully.



UPTEMPO PIECE,RHYTHM

NOTES

The technical approach to this rhythm part requires that it's played with a good degree of timing accuracy due to the overall tempo. You can sparingly add some fretting-hand muted scratches to enhance the groove, but don't overcrowd it. Approach relatively lightly, with an eighth-note framework (downstroke on the beat, upstroke on the off beat) and with a bounce so the whole sounds rhythmic, even when playing the single-string connecting notes seen in bars 4, 7 and 14.

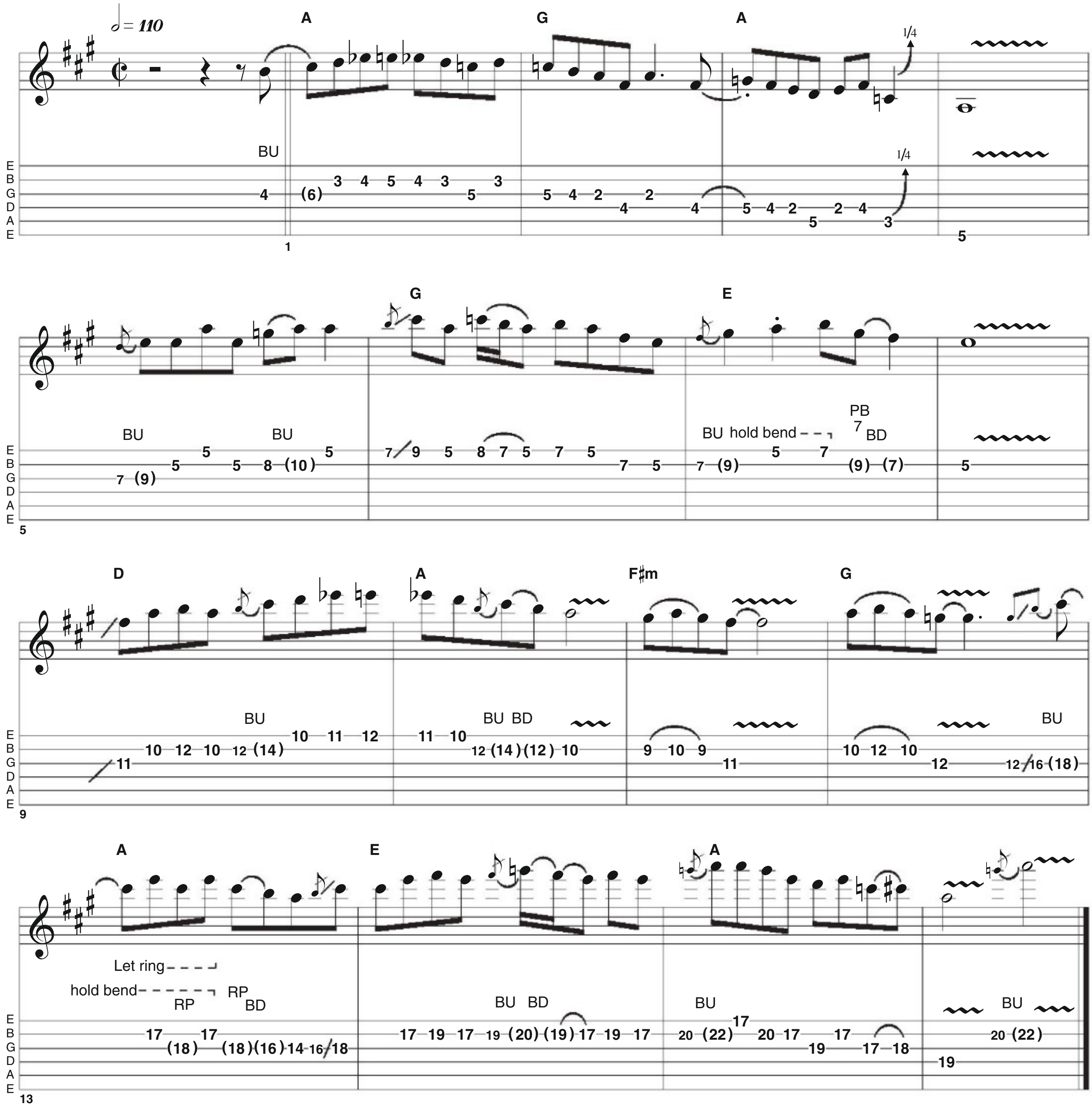


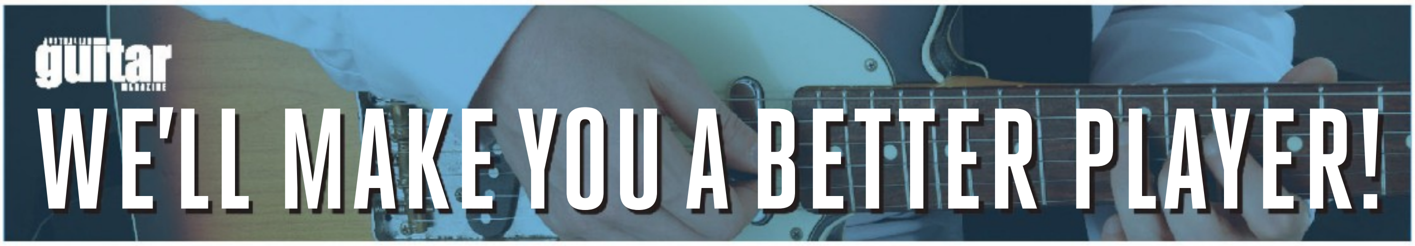
guitar
WE'LL MAKE YOU A BETTER PLAYER!

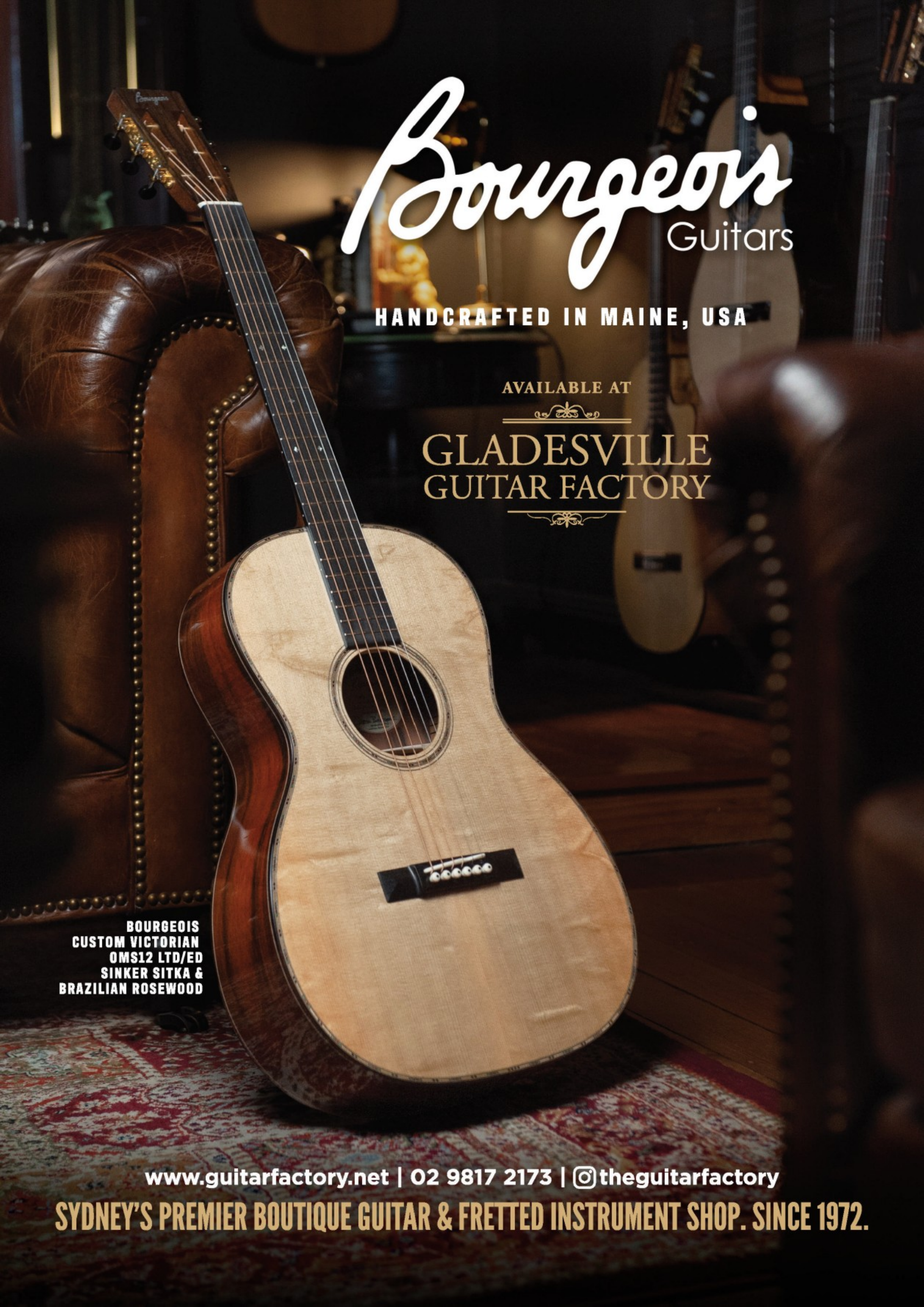
UPTEMPO PIECE, SOLO

NOTES

[Bars 1-6] These phrases are based on mixing notes taken from the A Minor Pentatonic (A-C-D-E-G) and A Major Pentatonic (A-B-C#-E-F#) scales, but as in the lick in bar 3, can also be looked at as being from A Mixolydian (A-B-C#-D-E-F#-G) as we have a descending line going from the ♭7th (G note) through the 6th (F#), 5th (E) and 4th (D). **[Bars 7-8]** This typical country bend marks the E chord here, and uses the root, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th from the E Mixolydian scale (E-F#-G#-A-B-C#-D). Ensure the second-string bend remains accurately at pitch before it descends. This almost 'mechanical' bending style is typical of country guitar.


𝅗𝅥 = 110
A
G
A
1/4
BU
E
D
F♯m
BU hold bend
PB
BD
Let ring
hold bend
RP
1
5
9
13


guitar
WE'LL MAKE YOU A BETTER PLAYER!



Bourgeois Guitars

HANDCRAFTED IN MAINE, USA

AVAILABLE AT

GLADESVILLE
GUITAR FACTORY

BOURGEOIS
CUSTOM VICTORIAN
OMS12 LTD/ED
SINKER SITKA &
BRAZILIAN ROSEWOOD

www.guitarfactory.net | 02 9817 2173 | theguitarfactory

SYDNEY'S PREMIER BOUTIQUE GUITAR & FRETTED INSTRUMENT SHOP. SINCE 1972.

HOT GEAR

CORT A10 COCOBOLO

RRP: $3,199
dynamicmusic.com.au

The Cort Gold A10-Cocobolo exudes boutique-style craftsmanship that extends beyond gorgeous tonewoods and distinguished accoutrements, with time-intensive hand-rolled fret edges, tone enhancing torrefied materials, and Fishman Flex Blend electronics for unforgettable performance.

JACKSON AMERICAN SERIES SOLOIST DX HT

RRP: $3,999 • fender.com

Born in Southern California in 1980, Jackson was the first brand to embrace the needs of hard rock and metal virtuosos by providing instruments with feature sets that catered to high-velocity playing. Jackson has continued to revolutionize its high-performance craft over the last 40 years, while dominating the metal landscape as the industry's leading shred machines. The all-new Jackson American Series is the next chapter in Jackson's storied legacy, marking the first made-in-Corona flagship product line for the brand.

FENDER PLAYER II MODIFIED TELECASTER

RRP: $1,599 • fender.com

Gear up and get ready to take your performance to the next level with Player II Modified. Featuring key upgrades for the modern guitarist and bassist, these versatile instruments are designed to handle anything you can throw at them. The Player II Modified Telecaster is a classic guitar with the modern player in mind. Everything about the neck is designed for fast and fluid playability, from the Modern "C"-profile with silky satin urethane finish on the back to the comfy 9.5"-radius slab rosewood or 1-piece maple fingerboard with smooth rolled edges and 22 medium jumbo frets. The alder body provides classic Fender punch and is available in a variety of exciting new finishes. The Player II noiseless pickups deliver classic Tele twang and bite while eliminating unwanted noise and the push/pull switch on the tone control provides even more tonal flexibility by changing the pickup wiring from parallel to series for fatter tones. The 6-saddle bridge, short post locking tuners, TUSQ nut and modern string tree all combine to keep tuning incredibly stable for even the most demanding bends or roaring rock leads. *Also available: Fender Player II Modified Stratocaster HSS Flloyd Rose - $1,849.*

THALIA TENNESSEE WHISKEY WING CAPO

RRP: $175 • egm.net.au

The Thalia Capo keeps your guitar in tune better than other capos through Human Touch technology, which is a proprietary silicone blend that exactly mimics the elasticity of the human finger. Human Touch ensures even pressure across the strings and a happy guitar that stays in tune! Every Thalia Capo comes with both standard and high tension OctaveTouch Fretpads – the latter are 2mm taller than standard and work with 12-string guitars, ukuleles, banjos and guitars with low profile necks.

THALIA GUITAR STRAP COLLECTION 2.5" IMPORTED ITALIAN LEATHER

RRP: $165 • egm.net.au

Made of Premium Italian Leather, Thalia's signature straps include an integrated exotic wood inlay with a Celtic Cross Engraving, which has been carefully India inked to bring out the detail. Straps come in both "standard" and "oversized" varieties (the latter is best for end-pin pickup jacks) and can be bundled with a Thalia Pick Puck (pictured) for a total of $215 (available as a standalone for $49.95).

Level
Sustain
Tone
Chelsea
EarthQuakerDevices

EARTHQUAKER DEVICES: CHELSEA

RRP: $359.99 • au.yamaha.com

Named after the guitar shop where it was purchased in 1989, the Chelsea replicates the original bass fuzz used by James Murphy in LCD Soundsystem recordings and on tour. With just three controls, it delivers everything from light overdrive to full on distortion, a Tone On/Off switch for midrange grind, and adjustable Sustain for wall-shaking bass notes or sustaining lead tones.

ZOOM
MULTISTOMP MS-90LP+
MEMORY
LOOP FX
RHYTHM
MENU
LOOP FX
RHYTHM
REC/PLAY
UNDO
STOP
HOLD▸CLEAR

ZOOM MS-90LP+

RRP: $279 • dynamicmusic.com.au

With the new MS-90LP+ loop pedal you can add loops, layers, effects and rhythm patterns with the tap of your foot. And with 32-bit float processing, the MS-90LP+ gives creators flawless audio quality every time. Loop with clear, high quality sound thanks to the flat phase response of the advanced analog circuitry. With dual AD converters and 32-bit float technology, you can add endless layers without losing sound quality. Simplify your looping with UNDO and STOP buttons—no double taps or holds needed. Access essential controls with the LOOP FX and RHYTHM switches. The MS-90LP+ provides 90 minutes of recording per loop, 13 hours total capacity, and storage for up to 100 loops.

DIST
GAIN
BOOST
MID
AMP
CH. VOL
MOD
BASS
DELAY/VERB
TREBLE
TAP
POD
EXPRESS
BLACK
PRESETS
LINE 6

LINE 6 POD EXPRESS BLACK

RRP: $389.99 • au.yamaha.com

POD Express Black is an ultra-portable amp and effects processor that gives you a toolbox of sounds for crafting classic and modern, high gain tones. Simple controls make it easy to use, while models derived from the HX family of processors ensure exceptional hard-driving sound and feel.

THE FUTURE OF MAGAZINES

SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE

AUSTRALIAN CAMERA
Camera checklists – Read before you buy!
SIGMA'S NEW BF CAMERA
SOUND+IMAGE
hi-fi
apc
guitar
PC PowerPlay
ProPhoto

Subscribe at **www.techmags.com.au**

Free delivery across Australia | Never miss an issue | Save money

FUTURE

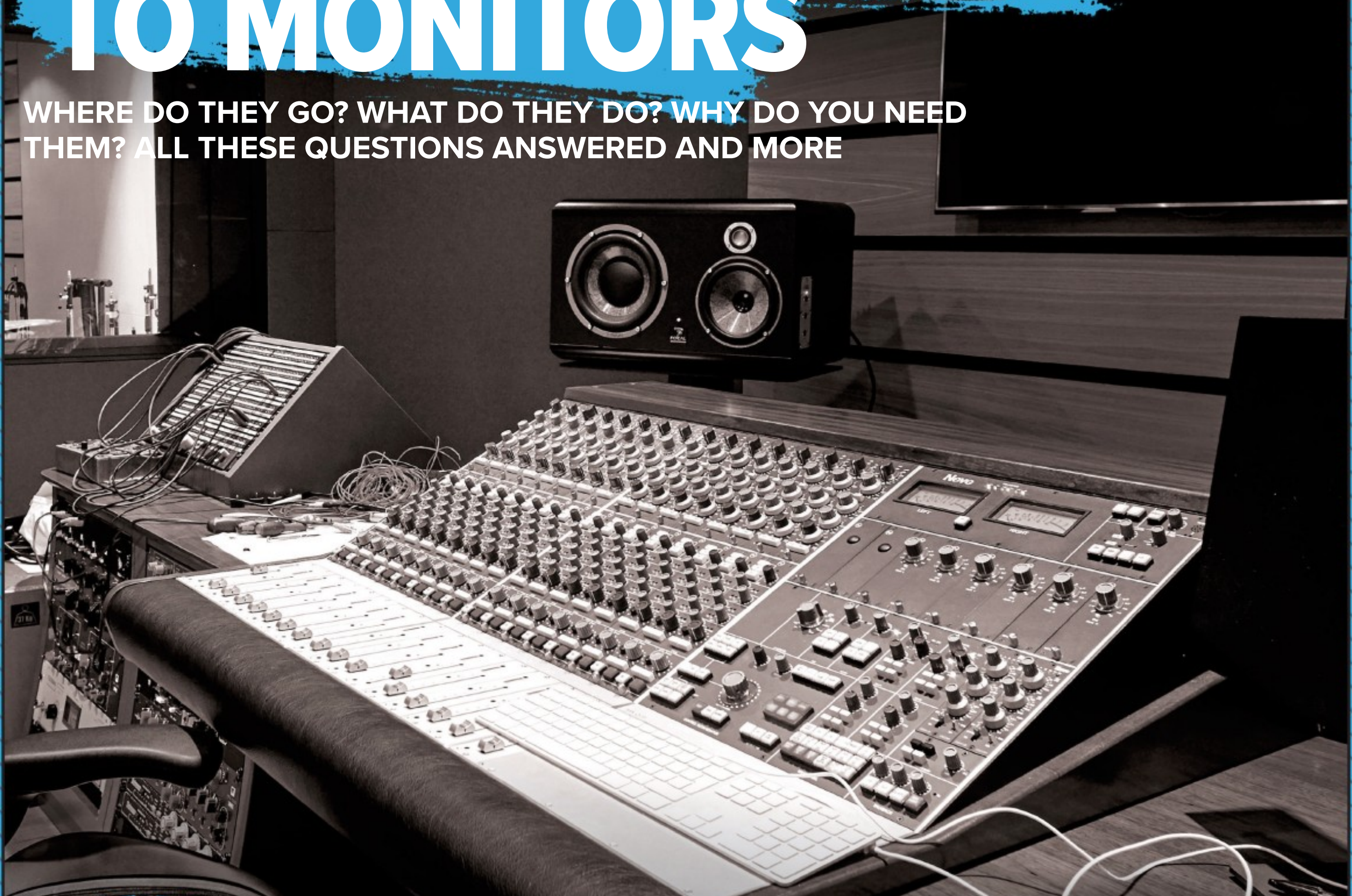
AUSTRALIAN recording TECHNIQUE

CAPTURE THE SOUND

SPECIAL FEATURE

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO MONITORS

WHERE DO THEY GO? WHAT DO THEY DO? WHY DO YOU NEED THEM? ALL THESE QUESTIONS ANSWERED AND MORE



ROAD-TESTED

SHURE MV7I SMART MICROPHONE & INTERFACE

THE CONVENIENCE-FIRST MANDATE OF PODCASTING KIT, BUT FOR MUSICIANS

BROUGHT TO YOU BY

JANDS

SHURE 100 YEARS

SHURE
SM7dB
bypass
preamp
+18dB +28dB
SHURE

SM7dB

DYNAMIC VOCAL MICROPHONE

BUILT-IN PREAMP.
BUILT ON LEGACY.

SCAN FOR
MORE DETAILS

proudly distributed by
JANDS
jands.com.au

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO MONITORS

You can spend a fortune on software vintage guitars, and high-end microphones, but if you're listening to the whole lot mixed together through a rubbish set of studio monitors, all that cash will have been wasted.

Words Andy Jones

Studio monitors are the most important items in a home studio. It makes sense, because on a very broad level, monitoring your music is simply listening to it and analysing it for ways in which it can be improved. Think of it as 'next level listening' as you'll need to hear your music in a very different way compared to listening to it purely on an 'enjoyment' level. Monitoring your music is really about getting inside of a mix, hearing each component and how it contributes to the final mix (or not), the space the mix covers (either in a stereo field or surround sound) and the range of frequencies occupied by each instrument or voice.

You need to get the balance right for all of these component parts, so let's see how a decent set of monitors can help.

WHAT IS MONITORING?

Monitoring is fundamentally about hearing and absorbing a piece of music as a whole, and assessing whether it is balanced, dynamic, and powerful where it needs to be. But it's also about breaking a tune down into its different parts and mastering how to use your monitors to correctly adjust volume, pan and EQ.

Firstly you need to listen to your instrument and vocal levels to make sure that none are too loud and overpowering, or others not contributing to the mix. This will then feedback to the mixing process where you can adjust track levels accordingly. While doing this, make a note of the dynamic range of your music: can you hear the quiet parts, or are the loud parts too extreme?

Next up you want to use your monitors to check the stereo (or surround) spread of your music. A good set of monitors will 'display' your music across a wide stereo image so you can hear and place each track in this space for greater clarity and a wider, more interesting user listening experience. Again, you can go back to your mix and adjust your pan positions according to what your monitors reveal.

Finally, use your monitors to check EQ levels. A good set of monitors should translate the EQ information: the bass, mids and high frequencies of your mix back to you with accurate clarity so you can check that your low-end isn't too muddy, your mid-range vocals cut through the mix, and your high end frequencies are lively and vibrant.

If your bass is too heavy, for example, this will translate to your listener's playback system so correctly adjusting EQ in your mix is vital.

WHERE DO I START?

The first stage of successful monitoring is to buy a set of studio speakers that are accurate and designed for honest studio monitoring. They need to convey your

> "Monitoring is fundamentally about hearing and absorbing a piece of music as a whole, and assessing whether it is balanced, dynamic, and powerful where it needs to be."

> **"Good studio monitors will detail everything so that you can mix accordingly; bad ones might have a coloured bass, or other frequency issues."**

Abbey Road Studios: you may not get this fancy at home, but you can try

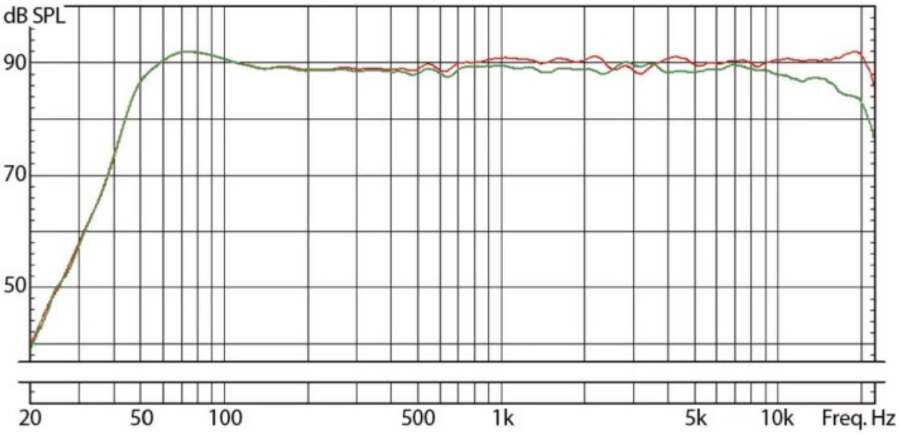
track's true stereo spread, levels and EQ in all of their glory so that you can mix accurately and your listener's will experience what you intend them to hear.

Good studio monitors will detail everything so that you can mix accordingly; bad ones might have a coloured bass, or other frequency issues. If this is the case, for example, they might emphasise your bass frequencies - meaning you respond by pulling back the bass while mixing to compensate. This can result in a thin and 'bass light' playback on your listener's systems. Not good!

So how do you know if a monitor is accurate or not? One straightforward way is to audition monitors at your local dealer using music that you know well to check that it is translating your favourite tunes accurately. If this is not practical, we've reviewed many monitors in this very section of Australian Guitar, including the recent KRK Rokit 5 G5, which we rated very highly.

However, in order to check whether a set of monitors delivers a decent sound, you can also check its tech specs. The frequency range of a set of monitors (measure in Hz) determines which range of frequencies it plays back.The human listening range is 20Hz to 20kHz so you'll want it to cover this, but don't be too disappointed if the stated level doesn't go right down to 20Hz. Most studio monitors go down to 40Hz or thereabouts which is a very good response for most of us. At the high end, many go beyond 20kHz as even higher frequencies do make an impact on what we hear. Basically the wider the stated response, the better your speakers.

Next check the response shape - if it is flat with a low variation in dB (this will be quoted as +-XdB where the lower the X the better) then that means there is little variation or 'colouring' in the response shape, so the bass levels won't be artificially boosted like in our example image below.



SETTING UP MONITORS

Once you have chosen a set of studio monitors it's time to set them up. This is a science of its own, but the basic idea is to set them up in an equilateral triangle where the distance between the left and right larger bass cones is the same as the distance between the speakers and your head, while the tweeter (smaller cone) should be level with your ears.

Don't place your monitors too close to the back wall - you're looking at between 30cm and a meter away from the wall; don't go less than 10cm. Also, it's quite feasible to monitor your music on a decent set of headphones, and the same 'accuracy' considerations apply. The bottom line is that whatever you choose - 'phones or speakers - they need to give you an honest appraisal of your music's mix so you can adjust it and your listener's hear your music exactly as you intended.

10 KEY MONITORING POINTS

1 It used to be that the more you spent on a set of studio monitors the more accurate they would be - great for perfect monitoring and mixing. However, over the last decade, studio monitoring technology has improved vastly so that you can buy great (and accurate) monitors for hundreds rather than thousands of dollars. Decide how much you want to spend, and then exhaust every possibility within that bracket.

2 Your room can impact on how well your studio monitors sound so it's likely that you'll need to make sure its acoustic is set up accurately. However, you can also work with a bad room by adjusting your monitors to compensate for it. When you set them up, you can adjust their position and EQ to make up for your room's inadequacies. It's therefore always good to play back your well known reference material through your speakers when you first set them up, and then adjust their EQ and position to play it back accurately.

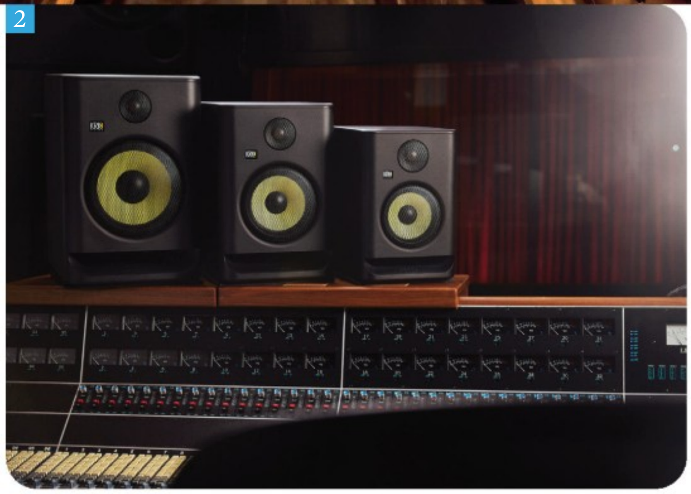
3 Advances in any studio monitor technology also help with a room's acoustic problems. Many have frequency responses that are 'self adjusting' or 'self calibrating'. That means that they take a reading of your room (usually by way of a microphone recording the room response) and adjust their frequency response (maybe reducing the bass or increasing the treble) to compensate for your room. This is not as complicated nor costly as it sounds, with cheaper monitors from KRK offering the technology at the low price end, while Genelec delivers a high end version, which has refined it with its One range.

4 We touched on the bass (large) and treble (small) cones that play back those specific frequency ranges above. There is also a third mid-sized cone or driver that focuses on the middle frequency ranges. If you can afford a set of more expensive three-driver speakers that features this third driver then you will likely get a more accurate mid-range playback, but many 'two-way' speakers still offer a good 'crossover' response with just two bass and treble drivers.

5 Whatever speakers you choose, loud doesn't mean better. You should never monitor at high levels when mixing, mostly to save your ears but also to make sure your listeners can hear all the mix detail, even at lower volume levels.

6 If you produce bass-heavy music, where you need to get a good picture of low frequencies up to around 50-60Hz, it's possible that you'll need to add a subwoofer to your setup. Check the frequency response of your main set of speakers, and if they only go down to 60Hz, audition a sub to go with them which will fill in that low frequency gap. Subs aren't essential if you have a good set of main speakers but it very much depends on the genre of music you are mixing in.

1

2


1. The monitors should sit with left and right speakers parallel
2. KRK monitors come highly recommended for home studios

7 It's a similar story with surround monitoring. If you are lucky enough to have projects where you are mixing in surround sound, you will likely need a speaker system, or array, that conveys all the 3D sonic information, although some headphones can deliver a good surround 'binaural' response.

8 A surround system will typically be a 5.1 system with five standard speakers (three at the front, two at the back, and a subwoofer). Obviously the cost increases but one important factor is that they speakers are all matched (the same) for a more accurate response.

Surround monitoring is therefore more expensive so we'd recommend mastering a standard stereo (2.1) system before immersing yourself in surround sound.

9 Using standard hi-fi speakers is not usually a good idea for studio monitoring as hi-fi speakers are often coloured to make the music sound artificially better. Small hi-fi speakers in particular might have bass enhancement to make up for their size, in which case you will hear more bass when you mix with them, resulting in that weedy mix translating to other systems.

10 Having two sets of reference monitors can also be a good idea: one relatively accurate set and one cheaper set with more of a 'hi-fi' response, the thinking being that if you can get your mix sounding good on both, you'll have all bases (and basses!) covered.

> **"Your room can impact on how well your studio monitors sound so it's likely that you'll need to make sure its acoustic is set up accurately."**

SHURE 100 YEARS
GLXD16+
DIGITAL WIRLESS GUITAR PEDAL SYSTEM
FREEDOM TO
ROAM THE STAGE
SCAN FOR
MORE DETAILS
proudly distributed by
JANDS
jands.com.au

Shure MV7i Smart Microphone & Interface

The convenience-first mandate of podcasting kit, except for musicians.

Review by **Chris Gill**

RRP From $579 **CONTACT** Jands **WEB** jands.com.au

In today's increasingly online world, it seems that everyone is a podcaster. Recently, the Shure MV7 and MV7+ became the favored microphone choices of podcasters for their excellent vocal clarity and internal DSP capabilities. Now Shure offers the MV7i, which offers the same outstanding sound quality, ease of use and internal DSP of these mics with the added benefit of a built-in 2-channel audio interface and combo XLR and ¼-inch input to provide a simple, streamlined recording or audio streaming rig that's ideal for studio and on-location applications.

Build Quality & Usability

Like its MV7 and MV7+ predecessors, the MV7i is a dynamic cardioid mic that connects directly to a Mac/PC computer or iOS/Android phone or tablet via USB-C. To control both channels and the MV7i's DSP features, you'll need to download the free MOTIV Mix desktop or MOTIV Audio mobile app. MOTIV provides auto level mode with Smart Gate, high-pass filter (off/75 Hz/150 Hz), real-time denoiser, digital Popper Stopper and reverb (plate, hall, studio) functions plus customizable tone and sound signature (speech, singing, acoustic/instrument), gain, EQ, compression and limiter controls for each channel. Muting for each channel can be engaged by tapping the LED panel on the mic itself, and the multi-color LED makes it easy to monitor levels.

Setup is simple and uncluttered. A USB-C cable connects the mic to the computer or mobile device, and a second sound source (additional mic, guitar, synth keyboard, etc.) plugs into the combo input jack. In addition to controls for each channel's settings, the MOTIV software includes a simple recording function that can be set up to capture stereo, mixdown or multi-track mixes and save them in the app's Library section where you can later perform basic editing functions like trimming and splitting.

Sound Quality

Like its predecessors the MV7 and MV7+, the MV7i is an excellent vocal mic that provides a slick, pro broadcaster polish to almost any voice with outstanding clarity and low-noise operation. The MOTIV software's auto level, Smart Gate, real-time denoiser and Popper Stopper functions are like having an engineer constantly monitoring and making crucial adjustments to keep the vocal audio signal pristine. When using a direct electric guitar, I found that its signal would usually drown out the vocal mic when both inputs used the auto level settings, but it was easily tamed by using the software's manual level setting for the guitar input.

If you plan on using MOTIV's recording capabilities to record podcasts, I recommend using the combo input for a second microphone rather than plugging an electric guitar or other instrument direct to the input. If you're fine with the sound of direct electric guitar with only reverb and light compression, go ahead and plug it in, but if you want distortion, various effects and speaker cabinet emulation you'll need to connect an external processor between the guitar and the MV7i's input. However, since the MV7i is both a mic and 2-channel audio interface, you can connect the mic/interface directly to a DAW on your computer or mobile device and insert your favorite guitar processor there.

Verdict

Combining the excellent vocal audio capturing capabilities of the acclaimed Shure MV7+ mic with a 2-channel audio interface, the Shure MV7i is an affordable and extremely useful creative tool for podcasting, streaming and studio or location recording that provides helpful processing for delivering consistent professional-sounding results.

PROS Built-in 2-channel audio interface streamlines and simplifies multiple audio source setups.

CONS Electric guitar needs external processor before input for distortion and other effects when using MOTIV software.

Audio-Technica ATH-R70XA

Brilliant mid-range monitoring headphones with wide open back sound. Review by **Shaun Prescott.**

RRP $449 **WEB** audio-technica.com/en-au/

Whether you're home recording or practicing discretely, a decent set of monitoring headphones is worth the outlay. Audio-Technica has ticked both boxes for years with the ATH-M50x, which launched in 2007 and still sits at the top of our list of the best headphones for guitar amps. The company's M series has proven reliable, somewhat overshadowing the R series, which takes an open back approach to the company's line of reference headphones.

Open back reference headphones make a lot of sense: this design principle is the best option for a clear, uncolored reproduction of the sound source, which is the whole point of monitoring headphones. It works because the drivers aren't enclosed in a shell that can cause unwanted vibrations to affect the sound. Similarly, the drivers aren't affected by the stymied air flow of an enclosed case, which means they can "breathe" more easily and thus deliver more accurate sound on the level of detail.

But it has drawbacks too: open back design tends to let exterior sound in and speaker sound out. You may not be too picky, but if you're using open backs in loud environments, that can be a dealbreaker. Similarly, if you're practicing fingerstyle next to, say, a sleeping partner, open backs bleed a lot of sound and probably aren't ideal. The R70xa is a new iteration of the R70x, which competed directly with Sennheiser's open back perennial, the HD600.

Removing the R70XA from the box, the first thing I noticed was how light and inconspicuous it is. The headband cover is pocked with oval holes, the honeycomb speaker housing has no protrusion, and the headband base is so thin as to seem flat. The aluminium speaker housing feels almost fragile in the hand, almost malleable, but I can confirm that no amount of clamping with my hands could break it.

These headphones are clearly meant to disappear once you've placed them on your head, and that goal is mostly achieved: I used this for playing guitar through an amp, yes, but I also used them all day at my desk, and they never became painful. Weight comes in at a slight 199 grams, while the cups are perfect circles rather than ovals, which suits the dimensions of my ears, but your mileage may vary.

The headband did have a weird habit of flapping out from under the headband cover, which meant that I fell into the habit of placing the unit onto my head while holding the headband in place. The headband is locked into the cover arch with a simple flap through one of the aforementioned oval holes, which makes it customizable, yes, but also inclined to pop out occasionally. This is obviously in the interests of making the unit as light as possible, but it remains a small annoyance.

> **"The frequency range is 5 to 40,000Hz which results in some astonishing detail, particularly at the higher, treble-centric ranges that are commonly clouded by the bass in most conventional headphones."**

The headset comes with a removable (and thus replaceable) dual-sided three metre cable with locking jacks and a 6.3mm adapter which can be screwed off to reveal the 3.5mm jack. The earpads are velour and can be replaced. A drawstring pouch is included.

The frequency range is 5 to 40,000Hz which results in some astonishing detail, particularly at the higher, treble-centric ranges that are commonly clouded by the bass in most conventional headphones. Flicking between the R70xa and a couple of other non-monitor headphones I have at hand – the Audio-Technica ATH-S300BT and the Sennheiser Momentum wired – the differences are stark when listening to a whole range of material.

Some examples: In Bell Witch's Mirror Reaper, the ride and crash cymbals sound full irrespective of the dread-inducing bass growl, while listening to Bert Jansch's brilliant collab with Loren Auerbach, it felt like the former's bright fingerstyle was being performed in the room. This sense of presence and spaciousness can be attributed to the open back design, and especially AT's treatment here: aside from the honeycomb plating, the rear of the speakers are entirely unobstructed by branding or the headband base. It's a real boon for the mid-range, which maintains its weight and vibrancy without shearing layers off either low or high frequencies.

These headphones are great for listening because they bring to life aspects of recorded music otherwise obscured by speakers tuned to foreground bass – which most consumer-level headphones do nowadays. As a player, the effect is less pleasant, albeit welcome. Tracks that I thought sounded fine through inferior units sounded not so great thanks to the harsh truth afforded by these reference headphones. This is, to be clear, exactly what you want from reference headphones, and is the strongest argument for why they're worth having around.

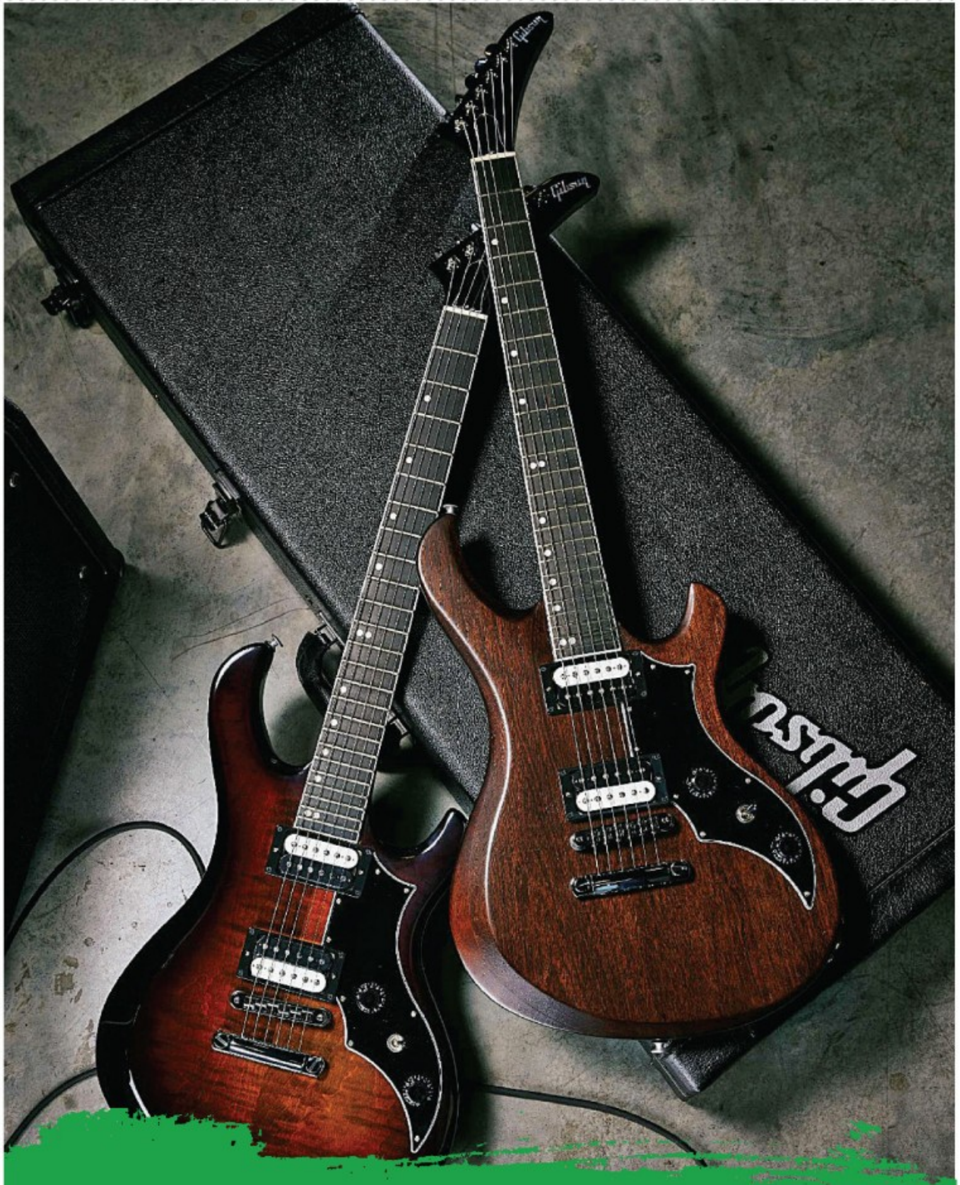
Are reference headphones worth having for home practice, even if you're not a home recorder? It's possibly overkill, though if you have to practice quietly, it's smarter to invest in a more neutral set of headphones that won't make you sound much better (or worse) than you are. The ATH-R70xa is great for practice but really – and this is the rub – designed for recording. It's brilliant for listening to, though its loooong dual-sided cable makes it fairly impractical for commuting, if you had versatility in mind.

Verdict

With the R70xa, Audio-Technica has built a superlative set of open back reference headphones that tick every important box. It has a gorgeously detailed and neutral sound stage and feels virtually weightless on the head. It does have some quirks, but overall, this is a brilliant mid-range professional headset.

PROS Incredibly wide and detailed sound stage; Featherlight build that nevertheless feels robust; Comfortable for very long stretches; Benefits of open back design

CONS Sound bleeding out is inherent to the open back design; Headband sometimes has a mind of its own



Gibson Victory and Victory Figured Top

The sleeper model returns for another lap around the stage.

Review by **Chris Gill**

RRP Victory, $3,999; Victory Figured Top, $4,999 **CONTACT** Gibson **WEB** Gibson.com

The original gibson Victory models (the dual-humbucker MVII and triple-pickup MVX) date back to the early 80s when Gibson was losing serious market share to Fender and super Strats from upstarts like Charvel, Jackson and Kramer. While it still retained a good chunk of Gibson DNA, the Victory's offset asymmetrical double cutaway shape and clever pickup switching options made it a strong competitor that got overshadowed by flashier designs. The Victory lasted only a few years during the end of the Norlin era and the relocation from Kalamazoo to Nashville, but over time it has earned status as a sleeper model.

Gibson's recently revived Victory model looks similar to the original MVII, but the new model is more of an update than a replica. As one of Gibson's more attractive forgotten models from its recent past (thankfully the butt-ugly Corvus from the same period doesn't seem to be on Gibson's radar), the new Victory offers guitarists an alternative to traditional Gibson designs both in form and function. Several notable differences distinguish the new Victory from its Eighties predecessor. The body is mahogany instead of boat anchor-heavy hardrock maple; the neck is also mahogany and has a 647mm scale, 24 frets and compound radius instead of a maple neck with a 628mm scale, 22 frets and 355mm radius; the headstock has an angled "hockey stick" Explorer-style shape instead of a straight "Firebird-esque" design; the new pickguard is smaller; the electronics include 80s Tribute humbuckers, push-pull coil split and inner/outer coil select switches and a three-way toggle instead of custom Tim Shaw humbuckers (plus a stacked middle single-coil size humbucker on the MVX) and a five-way blade pickup selector; and the new model's neck joint is contoured to provide even better access to the upper fret region.

Features that remain the same in addition to the offset body shape include an ebony fretboard, Tune-O-Matic bridge with stop tailpiece, black top hat knobs, side-mounted output jack, uncovered pickups with zebra bobbins and offset dot inlays. Gibson also offers a new alternate version of the Victory with a figured maple top for an additional $1,000.

Our test examples were a Figured Top model with a Wine Red Burst finish and a regular model with a Gold Mist Satin finish. The satin finish models have open pores and a rougher feel compared to the smooth, mirror-glass surface of the Figured Top models' gloss finishes. Construction is solid and meticulous — I especially appreciated the classic approach to having the fret nibs overhanging the single-ply neck binding.

Even with the 355mm scale, compound radius necks with 24 medium jumbo frets, these guitars still have that signature Gibson feel, partially thanks to the silky smooth ebony fretboards and slim, rounded C-shape profile that reminds me of a mid-Sixties SG. The extra deep treble side cutaway provides the best upper-fret access any Gibson model other than the Flying V has ever offered.

The Victory's slim body (less than 40mm thick), mahogany body and neck tone woods and dual-humbucker design land it pretty solidly within SG territory, but its longer scale length gives it more brightness and percussive twang while its coil-splitting and inner/outer coil selection capabilities expand its tonal palette. Although Gibson specs list just "80s Tribute Model" for the bridge and neck humbuckers, each pickup is different, with the hotter bridge model providing 15.8k ohms resistance while the neck pickup's resistance measures about 7.25k ohms. The master volume pot's push-pull coil split function provides sweet single-coil sparkle and spank, but the master tone pot's inner/outer switch delivers only a very subtle difference, noticeable when both pickups are engaged.

Our Figured Top example had bolder midrange heft and body than the standard Victory, which had a brighter scooped-mid character. Both models are hard rock beasts with ballsy punch when plugged into an overdriven amp, but the split-coil tones sound sweet and Strat-like with clean settings and a touch of reverb. The MV designation for the original Gibson Victory meant "multi-voice," and the new models live up to that description as well.

Verdict

Gibson's new Victory models are a great choice for players who love classic Gibson tones (particularly like an SG) but want more tonal versatility, different looks and modern performance upgrades like a fast compound radius neck and 24 frets.

PROS Gibson tones and feel for players who prefer super Strat-style looks. Coil-split function expands range of tones; High-performance upgrades that include a compound radius and 24 medium jumbo frets.

CONS Satin finish on the regular Victory model has a rough feel, especially on the neck.; Inner/outer coil select function makes only a subtle difference in tone.

Fender Standard Telecaster

Fender's most affordable guitar put to the test – what is all the internet hubbub about?
Review by **Matt McCracken.**

RRP $999 **CONTACT** Fender **WEB** au.fender.com

Much maligned online, the Fender Standard series caused quite a kerfuffle when it was announced earlier in the year. Before anyone had even had a chance to play or see one it was immediately dubbed the 'Squier with a Fender decal on the headstock', and it felt like the entire internet rushed to say how much better off you'd be with a Classic Vibe over it.

While it's not the first time a guitar manufactured in South Asia has had the honour of the full-fat Fender logo on its headstock - the recent Fender Tom Delonge Starcaster and the Fender Jim Adkins Telecaster both received similar treatment in the past – it's definitely the first one to really get guitarists' collective hackles up.

Where the old Fender Standard series was a Made in Mexico brand, this time the guitars are manufactured in Indonesia by Cor-Tek, and it's this small detail that's sent pockets of the internet alight with rancour. It might be heresy to purists but if you're one of the detractors, stick with me here because it might not be as bad as you think. And let's not forget Cor-Tek have had plenty of success manufacturing good quality guitars for cheap with other brands like PRS SE, Ibanez, Schecter, and of course, Squier.

At $999 the new Standard series is priced between the Squier Classic Vibe and Player II Series, aimed at beginner or intermediate players who want that iconic Fender headstock but don't have the cash to stump up for it - understandable in today's volatile economy. It represents a big shift from the big 'F', and judging from the reaction online, a big shift in your average guitarist's perception of the brand.

Is it all histrionics and hyperbole though or is Fender really trying to sell us a sword made of smoke? There's only one way to find out...

Pulling the Fender Standard Telecaster out of the box, my first impression was that it's a hefty thing in terms of body weight. It immediately felt noticeably heavier than my Player Plus Telecaster, and early reports indicate that through the translucent 3-Colour Sunburst finish there lies a four-piece poplar body. I can hear the guffaws already.

It's a vintage-style body shape so no belly or forearm curve here, but upon detailed inspection I can see that the paint has been applied pretty much perfectly. On the back there's what looks like some dirt that's gotten in the mix, and a small ding in the wood beneath the gloss finish, but these are tiny imperfections that certainly aren't noticeable unless your nose is right up against it.

It's hard to tell that it's a four-piece body looking at this model. The grain looks uninterrupted to my eye, but perhaps those joins are hidden underneath the more opaque sections of the paintwork. Overall, the wood grain looks great on this particular model, but that's no guarantee you'll get the same experience.

Moving to the neck, it's immediately clear to me that the fingerboard edges have been rolled. This isn't on the spec sheet on the official Fender website, and the edges of the Fender Standard Stratocaster we also have in for review are not rolled, so whether or not this is just a feature of the Telecaster remains to be seen. This discrepancy between models isn't ideal though, as no one wants a lottery as to

whether they get rolled edges or not.

With the modern 'C' neck profile it feels very similar to the Player Plus Tele I own and certainly sets it above what you'd get on a Squier. The fret edges are excellent, without any gaps between the wood and the metal of the fret, and nothing in the way of sharp edges. The neck has a satin finish which feels lovely and smooth, another upgrade over what you'd get on a vintage spec Classic Vibe Squier guitar. The fingerboard is Indian Laurel which will please those who dislike the lighter color of pau ferro, although in terms of feel, I don't think there's much difference.

Where the Classic Vibe series features vintage-style tuners, here we have the decidedly more modern sealed cast tuning machines, and this theme continues with the six-saddle bridge. It might put off those who want a true Tele experience, but having owned guitars with both I don't think there's all that much difference between the two.

The pickups are classic Tele through and through however, with the plate-mounted bridge pickup and classic covered neck pickup present and accounted for. These are ceramic pickups, unlike the Alnico ones you'll find in the Player series, and feature three-way switching as you'll find on the vast majority of Telecasters.

With the guitar out of the box I immediately sat down to play it unplugged, curious as to whether it really is just a Squier with a Fender decal. It didn't take me long to dispel this online myth though. The neck feels superb, much closer to a MIM Tele than it is to a Squier. I felt right at home from the off, those rolled fingerboard edges and satin neck allowing me to glide up and down the fretboard with ease.

The action is a little high out of the box for my liking, but that's easily remedied via a setup. I did also notice that it choked out a bit when bending a full step around the 20th fret, again something that can typically be fixed with a truss rod tweak. Other than that, whether I was playing chords, picking arpeggios, hitting blues bends, and riffing hard on the low E, the Fender Standard delivered excellent playability overall.

I also took it to practice to try it out standing up in a full band rehearsal, and you I could definitely feel the weight of it there. It's not so unbalanced you get neck dive, more the opposite - you can feel the weight of the body against the lightness of the neck which took some getting used to for me. I also had to lower it from my usual position as I'm more used to a belly carve, and when you have it higher on the strap the body really digs into your ribs.

Designed in California
Made in Indonesia
ISFJ24000332

I also noticed that when tuning up between songs the tuners aren't the most predictable. This might be because the strings need to bed in, or perhaps they'd benefit from a proper setup, but I did find them a little inconsistent. Sometimes I'd turn and nothing would happen, other times the tiniest turn would see a big jump on a tuner. I think if I owned the guitar and this issue persisted, I'd definitely look at replacing them, and this could well be part of the cost-saving measures it took to get the guitar to this price point.

Plugging it into my Orange Rocker 32 on the clean channel, that classic Tele twang is immediately noticeable in the bridge position. It's a little hotter than you'd get from a vintage-spec Alnico pickup, but not so much that you couldn't tell immediately what type of guitar it is. There's plenty of trebly bite here sans any harshness, and it cut through nicely amongst a full band in my rehearsal.

The neck pickup is even better in my opinion; dark and warm without a hint of mud. I spent a long time here picking arpeggios with some spring reverb and tape-style delay via my HX Stomp, absolutely basking in that warm wash of sound. Chords ring out nicely across the frequency spectrum with a beautiful balance, and that theme continues when you move to the middle position.

I'll be honest, I don't frequent the middle position with my number-one Tele, but I found the equilibrium between the two very opposed sounds really inspiring here. Neither the brightness of the bridge nor the warmth of the neck position overpower each other here, delivering a beautiful tonality that I don't doubt will find multiple applications in a variety of genres.

I'm playing in a noisy post-punk band at the moment, so in my testing it was subjected to plentiful effects both in terms of gain and time-based modulations. It performed admirably, played through multiple overdrive pedals, a nasty synth pedal, some heavy fuzz, and managed to retain its clarity when dripping with sweep echoes and heavily modulated reverbs.

Overall the sonics of the pickups are almost as pleasing as the Noiseless single-coils on my Player Plus, which makes the Standard brilliant value for the money. It's not going to replace a more expensive Telecaster of course, but I wouldn't hesitate to use it as a guitar for alternate tunings or backup alongside my regular gigging guitar.

The American Ultra II Stratocaster is a beautifully made instrument that feels great to play and delivers classic tones for the contemporary player. It also demonstrates how brilliant that original 1954 instrument really was: a guitar for the ages.

I'll admit to being caught up in the initial skepticism when Fender announced the Standard Series was going to be manufactured in Indonesia, and there are definitely some question marks that need to be addressed around the inconsistencies in the build of the review models we've seen so far. But looking at this particular guitar in a vacuum, it really is fantastic value for money.

It feels up to the standard of the Fender name and gives you all those classic Tele tones, excellent build quality, and playability for an amazing price. It feels like a justifiable improvement over the Squier Classic Vibe series too, plus, you get the benefit of that iconic Fender logo on the headstock – just don't show anyone what it says on the back.

Verdict:

For all those who've lambasted the Standard Series before playing one - you're going to have to eat your words I'm afraid. For the money, this is a lot of guitar that's well put together, and absolutely delivers that classic Telecaster experience. Ideal for players who are new to the brand or those looking for a good quality guitar around the $1,000 mark, the Standard is definitely worth your consideration.

PROS **Super playable neck feel with rolled fingerboard edges; Pickups deliver all those classic Tele tones; Versatile enough to handle a huge variety of styles**

CONS **Some question marks over consistency with these early models; Tuners felt unresponsive and inconsistent at times**

Cort Essence Series

Brilliant acoustics for well under a grand – is it too good to be true?

Review by **Steve Henderson.**

RRP $799 **CONTACT** Dynamic Music **CONTACT** 02 9939 1299 **WEB** dynamicmusic.com.au

Every now and then, a guitar company delivers a product of such great value that it's hard to ignore. As much as the Cort company seems to make a habit of this, their Essence Series is still a surprise. This particular range benefits from having limited options (two body shapes in two colours) and their focus on an Orchestra Model and a Grand Auditorium is perfect for today's acoustic player. And anyway, do we really need another dreadnought?

Both models feature a torrefied solid Sitka spruce soundboard, either natural or black, on a mahogany body with a Venetian cutaway – all wrapped in white binding with herringbone inner binding. The neck is mahogany (attached via a dovetail neck/body joint) topped with a genuine rosewood fretboard with pearl dots. The nut and saddle are genuine bone. The semi-gloss finish really suits the semi-vintage vibe and the old-school open-geared tuners help support this, too.

The torrefied spruce top means that the soundboard is drier, stiffer, and more responsive than new timber. The torrefaction process means the material is roasted to a predetermined moisture content, bypassing the decades of natural drying out that would otherwise be required. It causes the soundboard to be darker in hue (which I love) but, more importantly, it's also more stable. It's a fairly new procedure but it's catching on and players are reaping the benefits. What is surprising here is that it's usually confined to higher-end guitars. Not only that, but Cort has torrefied the braces as well, so that the whole soundboard structure is "aged" – as would happen naturally. It's quite amazing to see torrefied instruments in this price range.

Ah, yes, about the price. I received these two instruments with no real indication of price range and played them for a few days. Then I looked them up online and, finding them for sub-$800, I assumed I'd been given the wrong guitars – these were worth way more than that. So I called the importer and was informed that these instruments do, in fact, retail for $799. And...what? They're also electric?

The OC4 is an OM/000-style model with a cutaway. The physical dimensions are very familiar (easy to handle, very comfy) and the tone is perfect for the dedicated finger stylist. It's a mid-focussed sound with a sweet treble and a reserved bottom end. But, that bass tone is strong on the fundamental – there's nothing woolly about it, even in drop D. The Fishman Presys VT/S-core controls are hidden away behind the bass-side sound hole edge, and the system produces what must be about the most authentic reproduction of a guitar's tone.

The neck is a dream to play. It's a slim C-shape with a 1.69" nut width, a 15.75" fingerboard radius, and a 25.5" scale length. The semi-gloss finish is smooth and shines up a little after a few minutes playing. Playing up the neck a little you'll find a sparkle to the tone and a snap to the delivery. The sound is immediate and balanced.

> **"Both models feature a torrefied solid Sitka spruce soundboard, either natural or black, on a mahogany body with a Venetian cutaway – all wrapped in white binding with herringbone inner binding."**

The GA4 is a less familiar body shape and size. Think of it as a larger and deeper OM (since it has that tighter waist) or a slightly smaller dreadnought but with a much more comfortable shape. Compared to the OC4, it has a deeper and larger body and a 1.75" nut width. Sonically, the GA4 is clearly bigger, with a stronger bass range compared to the mids and highs, but it doesn't present the bass boom of a dreadnought. The GA's low notes are rich in fundamental frequencies but have more overtones than the OC – so there's a stronger bass presence with a bloom that lingers just a touch (very cool), but it never overpowers the mids. The mids, too, have more content and the treble range benefits from this. Along the neck, the highs seem to get louder but retain their sweetness. Fingerstyle players will love this.

The GA4 is a superbly easy and comfortable guitar to play, producing a balanced range whether strummed or fingerpicked. The neck, a touch wider at the nut than the OC4, is super easy to navigate and the body resonates nicely, with its extra cubic volume. The Fishman electronics do just as fine a job with this guitar as with the OC4. There's no edginess in the delivery and no piezo quack. Acoustically or plugged in, the GA4 easily competes in functionality with the larger dreadnoughts and jumbos.

Everything about the Essence Series is understated: no fretboard binding, opaque pearl dot inlays, the butter bean tuning buttons, the herringbone binding and rosette, and the worn-in appearance (thanks to the roasting process) of the soundboard. There's nothing "flash" about these guitars and yet they look so cool, so lived-in, so friendly. Even the electronics are understated. We tend to get excited about gadgetry but here's a system that does the job with just Volume and Tone.

Verdict

The Essence Series GA4 and OC4 are guitars that represent vintage attitude and tone with contemporary playability. And, for $800, they're great value.

PROS Superb build detail for the price; Plays and sounds great; Even tonal range; Pro features

CONS None

Taylor Gold Label 814e SB

The Gold Label series has its tonal focus on the glory days of pre-war acoustics, but with modern features. Review by **David Mead.**

RRP $8,999 **CONTACT** Taylor Guitars **WEB** www.taylorguitars.com

“Taylor's Gold Label guitars were fanfared at this year's NAMM Show in Anaheim and generated a great deal of interest from the industry and players alike. Why? Because this is something genuinely different from a brand that sits at the head of the premier league of the world's acoustic guitar business. And when one of the biggest in the business creates a novel take on an age old formula, the music world cocks an ear. If you're after a brief summary of events, it's as if Taylor's Andy Powers has taken a long hard look at the acoustic guitar's world stage and decided to change the scenery, combining what Taylor has always done well with a few magic touches of his own.

Enter the Super Auditorium body shape, for instance. It may look like the more established Grand Auditorium, but the body is very slightly longer (510mm as opposed to 508mm) and the lower bout a tad wider (415mm versus 406mm). But there are other factors at play here also. Starting at the headstock, you'll see there's a completely different Taylor logo – perhaps a little more old-school, like Gibson's pre-war script. And that is definitely the intention here: to recall the acoustic guitar's golden era of the 30s and 40s but using modern technology in order to do so.

There are brand-new cosmetic details like the “Continental” fretboard inlays and a redesigned pickguard that reflects the aforementioned design. Then there's the bridge, which, Taylor says ,“borrows the elegantly contoured curve wing design used with the Builder's Edition Collection, but on these guitars it's made from Honduran rosewood, rather than ebony, and incorporates bone bridge pins”. The Taylor design pot has definitely been stirred here.

Then there are the changes that are hidden from the eye, such as a new and updated version of Andy's celebrated and game-changing V-Class bracing, featuring “a fan-like arrangement of braces in the soundboard's lower bout… set in place using traditional hot hide glue”, says Taylor. And a long-tenon neck joint that Powers says not only increases low-end resonance in the manner of the more traditional dovetail assembly, it's also a bolt-on, glueless affair that will aid any micro-adjustment that becomes necessary during the guitar's lifetime (see the interview with Andy Powers that follows this review).

Among the list of new appointments on the Gold Label 814e SB we find more traditional fare: the top is torrified Sitka spruce and the back and sides are Honduran rosewood, a timber that is certainly up there with its more celebrated Brazilian cousin but still not on the highly endangered Appendix I CITES list. The rosewood is pale in colour here, matching the top's subtle sunburst, and has a reputation for superb tonal characteristics and for being brighter and louder than the Brazilian equivalent.

The back of the instrument comprises a four-piece composite of Honduran rosewood and, such is the expertise at play here on behalf of Taylor's lutherie team, you'd be hard pressed to see the joins. The wildness of the grain pattern certainly helps conceal them, but great skill has been employed to make things seem this seamless, it must be said.

The neck and fretboard timbers fall more within Taylor's norm, with mahogany for the former and ebony for the latter, the company's established standard carve to the back of the neck and a 45mm nut fashioned from Tusq.

One other feature that departs from Taylor's usual manifest is an LR Baggs Element VTC pickup and not the company's homegrown Expression System 2 with the signature three controls on the upper bout. This guitar really is full of surprises. And while we're here, we noticed that the deluxe hard case our Gold Label arrived in has a vinyl covering displaying a light brown colour that Taylor has named “British Cocoa”. We're not quite sure what to make of that…

Freeing the 814e from its case, we're reminded just how good a Taylor neck feels. Many different models have passed through our hands over the years, and the feel of the neck has been a consistent highlight. Neither too chunky nor too thin but always in orbit around that player-friendly sweet spot, which is exactly what you need to aid that all-important bonding experience with a new instrument. The smooth satin finish here enhances the playing experience, too.

There's plenty of muscle in the sound of the Gold Label. There's a lot of very characterful bass, which could easily be the Honduran rosewood showing its colours. The lower mids are rich and well balanced, and we can hear what Andy Powers means by the natural compression that comes into play when things get a little more enthusiastic with the picking hand. It has the effect of making chords sound ‘produced’ – as if they've been through some kind of electronic processing – which translates into a very powerful but still very musical sound.

Pulling back the dynamics and trying some gentle picking brought out another side of the 814e. On some acoustics we've played, gentle strumming can become weedy and thin sounding but not here. Everything remained beautifully transparent during those quieter moments; think of the intro to Led Zeppelin's Babe I'm Gonna Leave You. And, as a further reference point, it went on to handle the louder ‘flamenco moments’ in that tune like a pro as well.

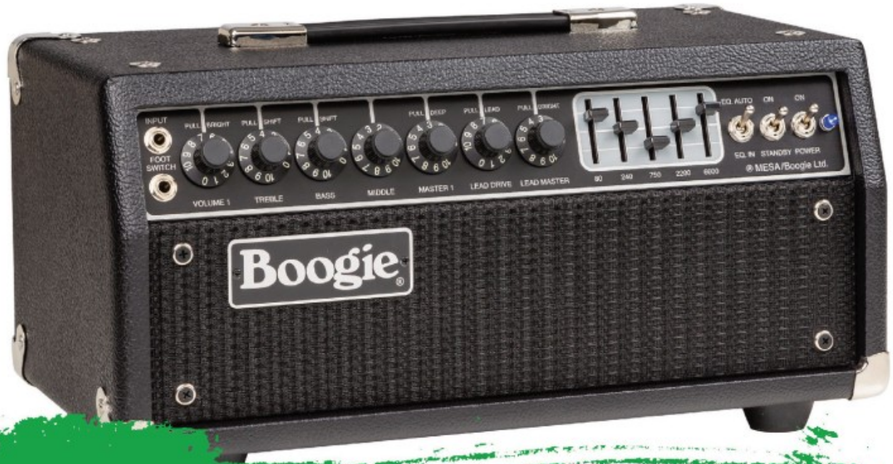
Verdict

There's so much that's new here: new bracing, new logo, new body shape, and so on, not forgetting that implication that the sound design here is to salute a much-loved and sought-after era. Has it succeeded? It kinda has, in that the instrument itself as a standalone is really very good. Andy Powers has harnessed a tonality that sits outside the Taylor norm but maintains the same excellent build quality and general execution. Does it sound like a vintage Gibson or Martin? Not really, no. But there's an undeniable tip of the hat in that direction present, and time – and plenty of strumming action – is going to open up the Sitka spruce top and its voice will perhaps veer evermore down that route.

Eight grand might seem steep, but there's everything you need here for a trustworthy companion that will entertain virtually every style you can imagine. We'd advise you to seek one out and audition it yourself.

PROS A great-sounding acoustic with all the power and tone you could need for practically any musical endeavour

CONS The price and ‘shock of the new’ may deter a few players



Mesa Boogie Mark IIC+ head

This reproduction of a sought-after classic captures the original's tone dead-on. Review by **Chris Gill.**

RRP $7,999 **CONTACT** Mesa Boogie **WEB** mesaboogie.com

For many guitarists, the Mesa Boogie Mark IIC+ ranks at the top of their Holy Grail, bucket list, unobtanium amps. The main reason the Mark IIC+ is so desirable is because it was James Hetfield's main amp (he actually had a IIC++ with additional gain) on Metallica's immortal *Master of Puppets*. The Mark IIC+'s use by Prince (the Purple Rain tour and beyond), John Petrucci with Dream Theater and studio legends Michael Landau, Steve Lukather and Dean Parks on hundreds of 80s hits also helped elevate its legendary status.

Mesa built only about 3,000 Mark IIC+ amps during its original 14-month run in the mid Eighties, but after four decades it's finally made its long-awaited return. The new Mark IIC+ is available in head-only or 1x12 combo versions and is essentially a fully loaded version with all of the most desirable options: 5-band graphic EQ, Simul-Class and reverb.

Build Quality

Taking the Mark IIC+ head out of the box is like opening a time capsule. With only seven knobs (six of which featuring pull functions) and a 5-band graphic EQ, the front panel looks downright austere compared to today's Mesa Mark series amps and even the recent JP-2C Mark IIC+ John Petrucci signature model. Rest assured that the reissued Mark IIC+ is a very faithful reproduction of the original with only minimal changes made due to modern safety regulations and parts availability. This is the short-chassis version of the head, so the Presence and Reverb knobs are on the rear panel, where you'll also find a buffered effects loop, a Slave output with level control and the Simul-Class/Class A switch for selecting 75-watt or 25-watt output.

Although the Mark IIC+ is a true dual-channel head (the Mark II was the first amp to offer channel switching), note that the "clean" and "lead" channels share the same Treble, Bass and Middle EQ controls. Dialing in EQ settings that sound good on both channels can be difficult and usually is somewhat of a compromise. The graphic EQ features a three-way switch with an "EQ auto" setting that engages the graphic EQ only when the Lead channel is selected, which can be helpful. However, the Treble, Bass and Middle controls are pre-gain and the graphic EQ is post-gain, so the settings of the standard EQ knobs still influence the overall tone in ways that don't always complement more sensitive high-gain settings. Pull Bright, pull Shift and pull Deep functions also provide additional tonal shaping capabilities.

Like the original Mark IIC+ head, the reissue features several footswitchable functions. Two footswitches with accompanying cables are provided, consisting of a single-footswitch controller for channel switching that plugs into the front panel below the input jack and a dual-footswitch controller for graphic EQ on/off and reverb on/off that plugs into a jack hidden underneath the chassis behind one of the 6L6 power tubes. The EQ/reverb footswitch jack is not in the most convenient place, and you'll definitely want to plug in the cable before the tubes heat up.

Sounds

The original design's quirks are all forgivable once a guitar is plugged in. The reissue Mark IIC+'s tones are simply divine. The clean tones are some of the finest ever heard from a Mesa Boogie amp, ranging from crisp sparkle with percussive spank to warm, rich jazz tones with full body and smooth sustain. The Mark IIC+'s high-gain lead channel tones are the main reason so many guitarists are willing to spend big bucks for an original model, and the reissue fully lives up to the legend with its deeply saturated distortion with complex, layered harmonics, pummeling attack, extremely articulate note definition and finely tuned midrange that dominates a mix. Even after four decades of high-gain amp design evolution, the Mark IIC+'s distortion tones still remain the Gold Standard.

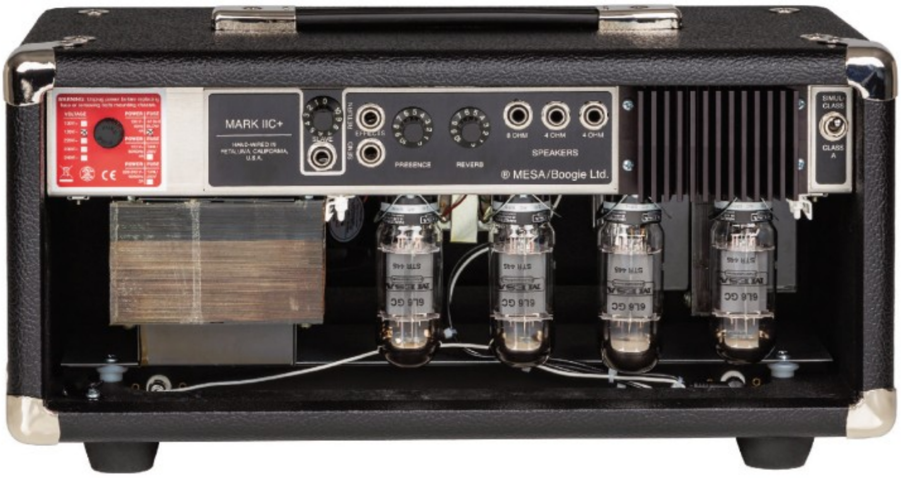
One important attribute to keep in mind is that the pre-gain EQ controls can affect the Lead channel quite dramatically. The Bass control in particular can get very boomy and woofy past 3, so it's best used in moderation with a high-gain Lead channel setting. Similarly, the Presence control can get a bit shrill at higher settings, so a little goes a long way. However, the extra range of these controls is helpful for dialing in gorgeous clean/overdrive tones and even Lead channel tones with moderate overdrive, particularly in studio recording applications where players aren't dependent on channel switching. Just like the original, the Mark IIC+ offers limited capabilities as a dual-channel amp in live applications, but as a single-channel amp in the studio it has few peers.

Verdict

Mesa Boogie's reissue of the venerated Mark IIC+ offers guitarists a dead-on perfect reproduction of the original amp from its wide range of stellar, professional tones and unbeaten high-gain textures to its somewhat quirky old school dual-channel functions and capabilities.

PROS Classic Mark IIC+ tones in all of their glory; 5-band graphic EQ provides exceptional tone-shaping versatility; Much more affordable and reliable than chasing down a 40-year-old vintage model.

CONS Both channels share the same Bass, Middle and Treble controls.;Awkward placement of the Reverb/EQ footswitch jack.



PHIL BARKER

OLLY CURTIS

Orange O Tone 40

What's loud, light and orange? The latest solid-state and affordable combo from Orange. Review by **Martin Smith.**

RRP $679 **CONTACT** Orange Amplification **WEB** www.orangeamps.com

Cliff Cooper, Orange's first CEO, founded the company back in 1968 during the beat combo heyday of British music, creating one of a select handful of history-making British valve amplifier brands. Orange had no issue marking itself out with a slew of oversized, colourful cabinets and even a trendy London store called, naturally, the Orange store. Business boomed and soon the brand had expanded to include both a record label and an artist management company. Ownership and production issues from 1978 to 1998 led to only a few products being manufactured with various partners including Gibson. However, since the millennium Orange has managed to rebuild its market position, retaining the esoteric sound and styling that has set the brand apart since its inception.

Today's market for guitar amps can perhaps be split into two general categories: powerful heads and cabs for professional touring musicians, and smaller units for smaller gigs, practice and domestic use. The new O Tone 40 attempts to bridge this gap, being loud enough for band use but portable enough for a one-hand carry. This is achieved by combining A/B Class solid-state topology with a sealed-back cabinet, housing the custom-designed 'Voice of the World' speaker. While such a small combo would often feature an open back, allowing for pedal and cable cartage, that isn't possible with the O Tone's sealed cabinet, and so extra luggage will likely be necessary. That said, this is a traditional design feature of Orange amps that produces the punchy sound many users know and love. The extra depth of this cabinet combined with the clean gain brings the Roland Cube amps to mind for their clean power and portability.

The clean single-channel structure of this amp would certainly suit players who have their pedal game dialled in to perfection and who may regard amps as anywhere from a device to make their pedals louder to a necessary inconvenience. In response, Orange wisely designed this to be small, light and loud. This amp leaves the character of the sound wide open for whichever guitars and pedals are appropriate for the application. A line output is provided to feed a power amp or recording device perhaps, but it's worth noting that this isn't a speaker emulation or an impulse response signal.

Feel & Sounds

We thought a suitable test for this amp would be an old-fashioned jam session with a drummer and bass player in our studio's live room. A wide array of the usual suspects, pedal-wise, were rigged up, anticipating the potential for some extensive tone flavouring. Beginning with the straight-up natural sound of the amp, we were greeted to a much larger soundstage than expected from its small form. This combo could be a contender for the loudest, smallest amp we've used and it had more than enough horsepower to hold its own against our loud rhythm section. The depth of sound emanating from the single 12-inch speaker was impressive.

Responsiveness to touch on the strings is a huge contributor to the enjoyment of playing electric guitar. Powerful notes may cause the amp to sag, resulting in a form of compression that feels sympathetic to the player. It's a beautiful thing – and thankfully we can feel a certain amount of that familiar response here. What usually accompanies this compression effect, certainly in most valve amplifiers, is saturation. This would come in the form of glassy excitement courtesy of electrons screaming through metal grids inside glass bottles.

With solid-state design, we don't have an overdrive facility built-in, but there are many reasons why it may be preferable for an amp not to distort. Indeed for the jazz, country and folk fraternities, the lack of hairy sizzle would be quite desirable, and with the O Tone's addition of reverb and tremolo this amp may make a very good partner for the cleaner-sounding guitarist.

It's a great-sounding digital reverb, too, tuned very much to our taste with a classic drip of presence and a good amount of dwell. The tremolo effect performed its throbbing duties in the expected way; however, its top speed is perhaps a little less than dizzying.

There's plenty of tone-shaping potential available via a three-band tone stack comprising the usual bass, middle, treble. These controls, due to the circuit design, offer more effective range than passive EQ, as found in traditional valve amplifiers like Fender and Marshall, for example. There's a solidity and boldness, too, resulting from the A/B Class power amp combined with the custom driver and cabinet, and we were able to achieve a slinkier tone by rolling off some bass and increasing the treble, contributing to a more Fender-y tone. Conversely, bringing up the mid control and reducing the top and bottom achieves a more Marshall-like frequency profile, overdrive pedal permitting.

Kicking in a subtle amount of valve-style overdrive provides a base layer of colour and personality and begins to illustrate where you can take the amp. We were even able to produce the sizzling saturation Orange is known for by the addition of a certain rodent-themed distortion pedal, with the amp staying tight and punchy despite some punishing gain. The effects loop is usually the most suitable place to connect some final reverb and delay, and we were soon swimming through a sea of modulated reverb.

Verdict

The balance of power and convenience here is ideal for the rehearsing/gigging guitar player, and the onboard reverb and tremolo have you covered for a wide range of clean sounds, extended further by the effects loop. Of course, where you take the amp is down to you and your pedalboard, but the O Tone supports that potential diversity, offering bags of power and punch in a tiny and very portable package.

PROS Tons of bold, clean headroom; lots of depth for a small 1x12 cabinet; very light and portable

CONS We would have liked a switching jack for both the reverb and tremolo effects – only the tremolo is footswitchable here

Marshall Studio 900

Marshall's cult classic from the 90s makes a comeback, joining the brand's Studio range as a low-watt combo. Review by **Stuart Williams.**

RRP $2,299 **CONTACT** Marshall Amplification **WEB** www.marshall.com

After the rip-roaring success of the JCM800 in the 80s, Marshall ushered in the 90s with the JCM900 – its then-modern evolution of the JCM series, which sought to bring more gain to the table in response to the trends of rock, metal and a burgeoning grunge scene.

To some, it hit the spot. To others, it never faced a fair trial, its main 'crime' seemingly being the fact that it wasn't the JCM800. Despite this, the JCM900 – particularly the 100-watt 4100 and 50-watt 4500 models – became the 'Marshall of the 90s', offering hot-rodded Marshall tone in combination with dual-channel, dual-master volume convenience and a spring reverb assignable in different amounts to each channel. This saw the 900 find favour, particularly in the live environment, with everyone from Dave Grohl in his early Foo Fighters rigs, Green Day's Billy Joe Armstrong, Weezer's Rivers Cuomo and, the man who shifted more guitar gear than anyone in the mid-90s, Noel Gallagher.

Somewhat unbelievably, the JCM900 turns 35 this year, and to mark the occasion Marshall has selected the 900 as the latest in its legacy products to receive the Studio treatment, scaling it down to a smaller-format amp with a maximum output of 20 watts offered in both head and combo versions, the latter of which is the subject of this review.

While this sort of exercise can often result in a redesigning of at least the power section of the amp to accommodate the reduced power, Marshall has opted to keep the design of the Studio 900 faithful to the original. "The schematic and values are the same as the full-size JCM900," says Marshall's product expert, Steve Smith. "We felt it was important to keep the headroom feel of the original tubes, while dropping volume by adjusting the plate voltages and using custom transformers, therefore keeping the character of the original."

Those design points include a pair of ECC83 valves in the preamp, a third for the phase splitter, and a pair of 5881s (essentially military-grade 6L6s) in the output section. However, that brings us to one of the other main reasons that the 900 is sometimes viewed less favourably than its older sibling: the presence of a hybrid valve/diode preamp stage. This observation by many a valve purist is used as a reason to diminish the 900's tonal qualities, while overlooking the fact that boosting the input of a JCM800 with an analogue overdrive is common practice, so we're not going to dwell on it here.

Elsewhere, the Studio 900 continues to follow an almost identical design to the 4100/4500 models. On the front panel, we get gain controls for each channel, a shared EQ, reverb controls and a pair of volume knobs to balance the output of each channel. To the back, there are five speaker outputs, a pair of line outputs (one direct, one Recording Compensated), an effects loop (with the original's trim pot replaced by a full-size control knob), and the Studio's power-reducing toggle switch. This drops the output from the full 20 watts down to five watts in the middle position and less than one watt at the minimum setting, and the whole lot is pumped through a Celestion G12T-75 speaker.

In use, the Studio 900's Channel A (the clean channel) brings us our first surprise. Far from the heated-up bluesy clean tone we were expecting, it's quite the opposite, yielding a sharp, spiky, jabbing clean sound. It works brilliantly paired with single coils for funk playing, or really any style where you want your clean sound to be just that. With Presence and Treble controls to hand, there's comprehensive control in the top-end frequencies, which is just as well because we found ourselves needing to round off some of the sharp edges at times.

With the output power set to 20 watts and the channel volume at 'band levels', there's a lot of headroom in Channel A's gain control. This drops a bit in the different power modes, and by balancing the preamp gain and output volume, it's possible to move into slight overdrive at the upper end of the gain scale. Together with some of the true spring reverb courtesy of the Accutronics tank, it's a versatile channel that adds an extra dimension.

Channel B is where we find the rockier side of the Studio 900. There's plenty of gain, but it's still very much centred in the indie/alternative/classic zone, with the potential for the more vintage end of metal achievable once the dial is maxed out and the output volume cranked. All the while, the Studio 900 keeps an amount of abrasive edge to the sound, and it's clear to see why it has been (and continues to be) a favourite of punkier players.

It's worth noting that we tried the combo (which has an identical feature set to the head version) into Marshall's Celestion V-Type-loaded Studio Classic 1x12 cab, as well as in parallel with the internal G75T. Obviously, the extension cab doesn't have an amplifier or spring reverb tank housed inside of it, but when going into the Studio Classic cab the sound became altogether beefier on both channels, with more weight and low-end in the room.

The only slight oversight we can point out is that for an amp that's designed with the purpose of taming volume levels, we'd love to see the Recording Compensated output mute the speaker for direct, mic-free, quiet recording.

Verdict

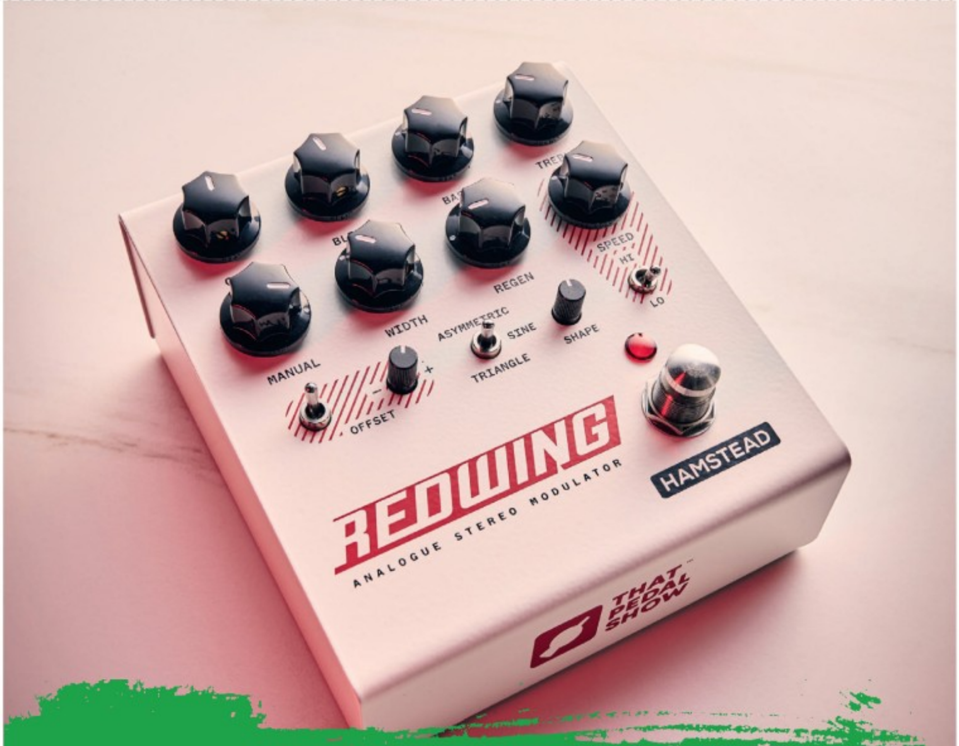
If you find yourself swearing at manuals as you try to memorise menu and button sequences with your gear, then you'll love the simplicity of the Studio 900. It's a good old-fashioned valve amp that does what you expect. The controls are laid out in a very easy-to-understand, linear arrangement with no dual functionality or hidden features.

While some will gripe at the Studio's close proximity to the JCM900 Vintage Reissue's price, we applaud Marshall's convictions for keeping the build of its heritage-derived products in the UK. The only thing we'd like to see is some more '2025' features when it comes to connectivity in an age of home recording and near-silent stages.

PROS Excellent lower-powered JCM900 tones; spring reverb; easy to use

CONS It's the same price as a full-size JCM900 head; no speaker-less operation

OLLY CURTIS



Hamstead x That Pedal Show Redwing Analogue Stereo Modulator

A collaboration with That Pedal Show, Hamstead's Redwing is an all-analogue modulation monster. Review by **Trevor Curwen.**

RRP $839 **CONTACT** Hamstead Soundworks **WEB** www.hamsteadsoundworks.com

There are myriad modulation pedals available these days. However, when it comes to chorus and flanging, there are still plenty of players that regard the first run of bucket brigade analogue pedals as the benchmark-setters for sonic quality. Daniel Steinhardt from That Pedal Show is one such player, holding the Boss CE-1 Chorus Ensemble pedal and the Electro-Harmonix Electric Mistress flanger in particularly high regard. Daniel says: "Over the years, I've always searched for devices that not only match the magic of those originals tonally but also surpass them in terms of sound and functionality within a modern rig."

That search has now culminated in the Redwing, designed by Peter Hamstead of the British boutique amp and pedal company that bears his name, with plenty of informed input from TPS. The Redwing creates its sounds by using two independent BBD delay lines that are modulated by Hamstead's analogue 'signature' waveform generation as found in the brand's tremolo pedal. Connectivity is very flexible – it can work as a mono pedal in a standard signal chain, but it has stereo outputs and a stereo input (via a TRS jack), so you can have other stereo pedals in the chain before it. The stereo output can be configured as true stereo or as Wet/Dry with dry-through to the right and both modulation lines summed to the left output.

In Use

Flanging, chorus and vibrato are closely related, so it's quite possible to provide all three in an analogue pedal if you have the correct set of parameters to adjust. The first key to this is the pedal's Manual knob, which adjusts the delay time – generally speaking, that means shorter delay times for flanging and longer ones for chorus. A Blend control is also needed to set the ratio of dry to wet signal; vibrato is created with wet signal only. Also crucial is the Regen knob, which controls the amount of effected signal fed back into the modulation circuit and is essential for the metallic whoosh of a flanger, for example.

Besides these there are Width and Speed controls for the modulation, and a choice of three modulation waveforms (Asymmetric, Sine and Triangle) that can be tweaked with a Shape knob to tilt the waveform lopsidedly left or right. Bass and treble knobs with up to 15dB cut or boost shape the wet signal only, while a gain knob, starting at unity, sets the output of the pedal for a slight boost or at least makes sure your modulation doesn't get lost in the mix when you kick the effect in.

There is a lot to explore in this pedal with the many juxtapositions of knobs and switches offering nuanced sound choices. But our first task was to see how its sounds matched up to our own array of vintage 1970s pedals: EHX's Electric Mistress flanger and its mains-powered Deluxe sibling, plus the Boss CE-1 chorus/vibrato and CE-2 chorus. And with judicious tweaking, we found that it could be a viable substitute.

Now, while those old pedals with their minimal knob arrays may be easy to dial in, they can have certain drawbacks such as bulky form factors, reliability of old components, non-standard power needs, no gain make-up to remedy volume drop when kicked in, and a fixed EQ. The Redwing has none of those problems and has parameters with larger ranges, so it can go much further creating more extreme sounds if you want them or, perhaps more importantly, can dial in the sounds that 'fall between the cracks' of other units.

So you can get plenty of variations of flanging (including really good static flanging with no obvious sweep), chorus, vibrato, ring modulation and also some decent rotary speaker simulation. One important parameter that helps with that rotary sound is the one we've not yet mentioned – the Offset. This brings in a knob to offset one delay from the other by your chosen amount either side of the main Manual setting, opening up a whole other layer of sounds. If you're using the pedal in mono, this offset can give you a bi-chorus or bi-flange effect with an added sense of dimension. It also means you can dial in through-zero flanging where the two flanging filters cross through one another. This is a distinctive sound that's great with fuzz or distortion in front of it if you want to get close to Jimi's House Burning Down tone.

Performance options include a Control input for an expression pedal with direct control over modulation speed – a practical addition if you wish to do the slow and fast rotary speaker speed switching. There's also temporary feedback oscillation available via a Hold socket for a momentary footswitch, which you might use to tap out a rhythmic pattern or to simply throw a curveball at your audience.

Verdict

This is a very well-thought-out pedal that is sonically excellent. Not only is it capable of BBD-created effects, it also provides hands-on control of all the parameters you need to tailor these effects to your exact needs – whether you're trying to emulate a vintage effect or are looking to create something bespoke – all in mono or full stereo.

Of course, because the nuanced control can create so much variation, it would be a fine thing to be able to store your newly minted sounds for future recall. However, this is a purely analogue pedal and it'll be down to the age-old method of recording all of your favourite settings on paper. That lack of presets could mean you might need to execute a few knob and switch position changes on stage, unless you're using just the one sound. But it would never be a problem in a recording situation.

The other side of that WYSIWYG coin is there's always the opportunity for happy accidents during tweaking, with new sounds waiting to be discovered. Embrace the analogue: this is your hands-on modulation toolkit!

PROS **Full stereo I/O operation; massive range of sound variation; expression pedal/footswitched performance options**

CONS **Footswitching lag; you'll need to go elsewhere if you want the modern accoutrements of presets and MIDI**

PHIL BARKER

PRS Custom 24

1985–PRESENT

CATEGORY: SOLIDBODY ELECTRIC GUITAR

By CHRIS GILL

VERY FEW CLASSIC guitar models have remained in continuous production for 40 years since their initial introduction. Gibson's Les Paul Model/Standard lasted only eight years from 1952-60 before its original design was temporarily discontinued and later revived in 1968, and even the venerated Stratocaster narrowly escaped the chopping block in the early Eighties during the final days of Fender's CBS ownership.

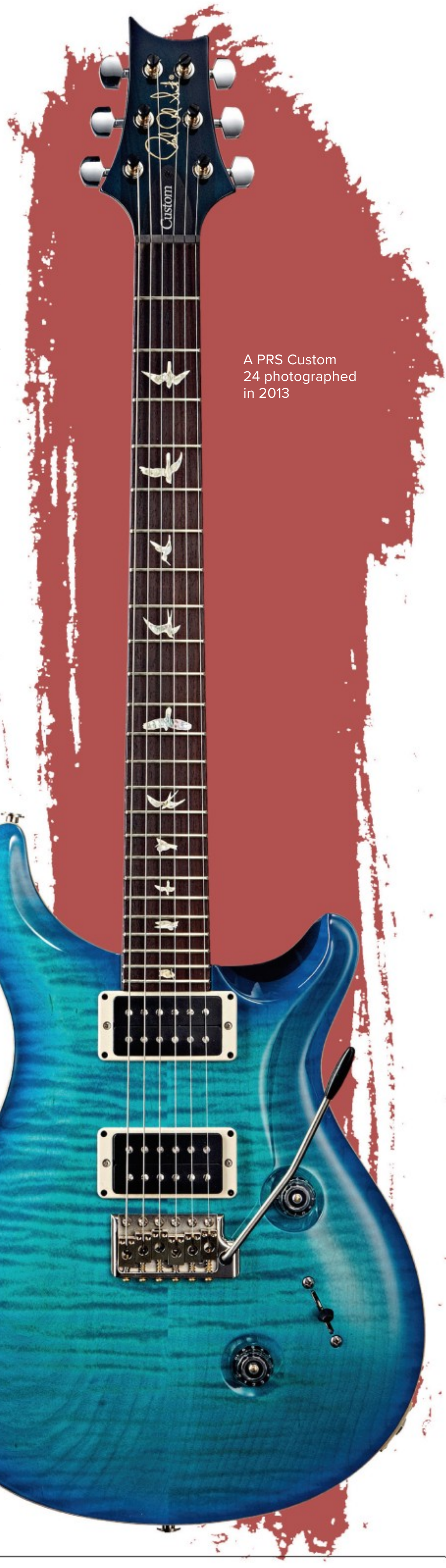
The PRS Custom 24 (originally just called the Custom) has recently joined this rare class of long-lived classic instruments by celebrating its 40th anniversary. Introduced in 1985, the Custom was Paul Reed Smith's first production model, and it made an immediate impressive first impression, thanks to its deft combination of skilled craftsmanship, high-quality materials and blend of classic features with modern upgrades. Making its initial bow during the height of super-strat mania, the Custom provided an attractive alternative for guitarists who yearned for the high-quality standards, tones and classic looks of a vintage instrument but with modern, high-performance upgrades.

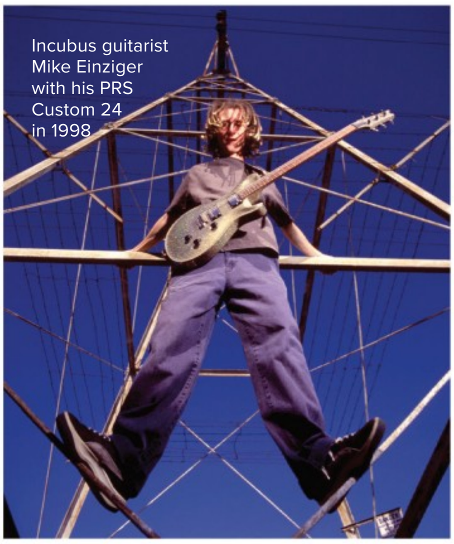
Key Custom 24 features include a 25-inch scale length that provides a "just right" balance between the slinky feel of a 24-3/4-inch Gibson-style scale and the twangy percussive attack of a 25-1/2-inch Fender-style scale, 24 frets and the super dependable non-locking PRS Tremolo System with a low-friction nut that keeps the strings reliably in tune. The original pickups Standard Treble and Standard Bass humbuckers were Smith's own design, and controls initially consisted of a master volume, five-position rotary pickup selector switch with humbucking and split coil settings and an innovative "sweet" switch that imitated a long cable's capacitance load effect on treble frequencies. The materials used for the highly figured flame-maple tops and one-piece mahogany backs come from Paul Reed Smith's impressive stash of quality tone woods. PRS collectors seek Custom 24 models made before 1991, when the necks featured Brazilian rosewood fretboards. Early examples with "Birds" inlays also command a premium over models with round "Moon" inlays.

> "PRS COLLECTORS SEEK CUSTOM 24 MODELS MADE BEFORE 1991, WHEN THE NECKS FEATURED BRAZILIAN ROSEWOOD FRETBOARDS"

Paul Reed Smith constantly improved and refined the Custom 24's design, including various design tweaks to the tremolo system, tuners and the introduction of evolving pickup designs. One of the biggest changes came in 2011, when the controls were changed to a master volume, master tone and five-position blade switch configuration. In the early Nineties PRS started offering a stop-tail bridge option, and today, players can choose variations of the Custom 24 with Floyd Rose or piezo bridges.

The list of Custom 24 users is long and spans a wide variety of musical styles. Ted Nugent and Al Di Meola were some of the Custom 24's earliest adopters. The model enjoyed a huge boost in popularity during the 90s and early 2000s via players like Mikael Akerfeldt with Opeth, Mike Einziger with Incubus and Mike Shinoda and Brad Delson with Linkin Park. More recent fans include Adam Nolly Getgood and Mark Holcomb of Periphery and Ryan Knight of the Black Dahlia Murder.


A PRS Custom 24 photographed in 2013


Incubus guitarist Mike Einziger with his PRS Custom 24 in 1998

BOB BERG/GETTY IMAGES, ADAM GASSON/FUTURE

ATH-R70xa
ATH-R50x
ATH-R30x

OPEN YOUR *EARS*

Introducing the **ATH-R70xa**, **ATH-R50x** and new **ATH-R30x**
open-back reference headphones -
engineered for critcal listening, *made for more.*

audio-technica

Scan the code for
more information.

ZOOM
MULTISTOMP MS-80IR+
MULTISTOMP MS-70CDR+
MULTISTOMP MS-60B+
MULTISTOMP MS-200D+
RAY DRIVE
BASS DRIVER PREAMP
USE AD-16 ONLY
DC 9V
DC 5V
INPUT
OUTPUT
MEMORY
SCROLL
HOLD • TUNER

ZOOM®

MUSICIANS NEVER STOP CREATING, SAMPLING, RECORDING, MIXING, AND LISTENING. ZOOM PROVIDES GEAR SO THAT YOUR MUSICAL VOICE AND STYLE IS HEARD.

SEE US AT THE MELBOURNE GUITAR SHOW

MAKE EVERY STEP LEGENDARY
With the tap of your foot you can add loops, layers, effects and rhythm patterns. And with 32-bit float processing, the **MS-90LP+** gives creators flawless audio quality every time.

The MS-80IR+ gives guitarists an unbelievable assortment of amps created using the latest in IR and modeling technology. It comes fully stacked with 16 of the world's most revered amps and cabs plus 7 expertly crafted Zoom originals.

100 PEDALS IN ONE!
The **MS-50G+ MultiStomp** combines the power of a multi-effects processor into a single stompbox. With 100 effects, guitarists now have the perfect utility pedal to compliment their personalized pedal board

The **Zoom MS-70CDR+**:
Your New Modulation Station.
The MS-70CDR+ gives musicians 149spatial effects ranging from lush choruses to crystal-clear delays to atmospheric reverbs. This single stompbox can shape your tone and provide endless depth and textures.

ZOOM MS-60B+ MultiStomp for Bass.
Bass players know when they've dialed into that perfect low end tone. The MS-60B+gets you there with its renowned amp models, tone-defining preamps, and a huge number of effects.

23 Awesome Classic & Modern Amps.
For Those About To Shred, We Salute You The MS-200D+ features 200 drives and distortions, the most ever in one stompbox. The MS-200D+ features 164 Zoom originals plus 36 emulations of classic tones that cover overdrives, distortions, boosts, fuzz, and more.

ZOOM® | We're For Creators®

Proudly distributed by Dynamic Music | www.dynamicmusic.com.au | +61 2 9939 1299 | @zoomaustralia

Scan to find a retailer